

Understanding the Trinity: God as One and Three

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn back to that passage that we read. I'm going to concede from the very outset that this is not going to be a sermon in the usual sense. It will be a little bit more low-key this evening. It's more of a lecture than anything else. But I do hope, just in case there are any groans, I do hope that it will be an informative and a stimulating rediscovery of who God is, because that's what we're all about, and that's what I would like us to share together. Let's read the first few verses of that chapter again. To God's elect exiles, this is 1 Peter chapter 1, to God's elect exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through the sanctification, sanctifying work of the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with His blood. And I don't know if you noticed, but as we read that chapter, it was full of God. And I'd like us this evening to try to discover something more about who God is.

I don't understand anyone who wants to follow Jesus and who claims to follow Jesus, and yet who doesn't want to know more about God. Surely, if we love Jesus because He first loved us, surely we want to know much more about who God is and how we can serve Him and how He can touch and how He can assist us in our daily living and what we can learn from Him. So tonight, I want us to look at God as one and God as three. Let me repeat that. God as one, only one God, and yet at the same time, God as three persons. In other words, we're going to be talking about the Trinity. God as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, where do we go to discover all of this? Well, there is only one place, and that is the Bible. And here's one of these passages which talks about God as three, Father, Son, and Spirit. Even in these opening verses, we're introduced to the Father, to the Son, and to the Spirit. And as we read through this passage, there's an interweaving of Father, Son, and Spirit. Now, that doesn't always happen in every chapter in the Bible, but it does happen here, and it happens in other places as well. Now, there are several things we know about God. The Bible is the story of what God has done. And from this story, from the beginning to end, we get to know what God is like. Here are some of the things that are made clear to us throughout the Bible. Number one, God is eternal. What does that mean? It means that He has no beginning and no end. He's not like us. We had a beginning. We have an end. Everything we know of has a beginning and it has an end. Not God. God is eternal. He just is. And then the Bible makes clear that He's also almighty. The theologians who study this, they call it God as ineffable. He is almighty. There is nothing that He cannot do. You know the song that the children sing, my God is so big, so strong, and so mighty. There is nothing that He cannot do. That is absolute biblical truth when they sing that.

And then He is perfect. We saw something about that this morning in the person of Jesus Christ. There are no blemishes. There are no flaws. He wouldn't be God if there was any sinfulness or defect within Him. There's no deficiency. He is morally perfect in every way. And then He knows everything. He knows everything. He knows everything. He knows every single event that's taking place in the world right now. He knows our thoughts, what's going on in our heads, whether we're easily distracted this evening as we're trying to worship. He knows where our minds are. And He's asking us, where are you? Where is your mind? Is your mind focused on what we're doing this evening? And it's the same with everybody this evening. It doesn't matter who you are, how small, how insignificant, how important, whatever. All of these things are man-made constructs because we're all the same when it comes to God. The most important ruler in the world and the least significant child in the world, all the same to God. We're all on the same level. God knows everything. And then what else do we find out about God? The Bible shows us that God is spirit, which means that's the reason why He is invisible. We can't see Him because He is spirit. And it also tells us that He never changes.

He is immutable. The same God that we worship today is the same God Abraham worshipped. How many years ago, 4,000 years ago, 4,000 years ago? Moses worshipped? Exactly the same God. He never changes.

The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament because He never changes. And then here's another fascinating fact about God. He's everywhere.

[6 : 01] He's in the further star in the universe. Who knows where that is? We don't know. We don't understand the universe and the way it works. And the sizes of the galaxies of the universe are just mind-boggling. And God is everywhere because He created everything in all its intensity and immensity.

And then the Bible also tells us that there is only one God. I mean, people talk today about different gods of different religions. That cannot be. There can only be one God. There is only one.

But what I really want to focus on tonight is something else about God. At the same time as God being one, He's also three. He is one God. And at the same time, He is three persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I want us to try and understand that this evening and see how it applies in our practical lives. God is one. And yet God is three. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, it took several hundreds of years, you might be interested to hear, before the church got their heads around how to understand the Trinity. And to strike the correct balance between believing that God was one God and God was three. It took even longer to accept that each of these three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, were the same God and equal in divine status. In other words, God the Father is equal to God the Son. God the Son is equal to God the Spirit. God the Spirit is equal to God the Father.

They are equal in power and in glory. It was a man called Tertullian, you'll be interested to know, who lived in North Africa from 155 AD to 240, and who invented the term persons to describe each of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And that term persons helps us to understand the distinction between God being one and God being three. Unfortunately, Tertullian wasn't right in everything that he believed because he came to believe that the Son was somehow inferior to God the Father. He was wrong.

Not everyone who was a church father was right. They all had their weaknesses in some respect. One of the problems when we're talking about the Trinity is that the Word itself is not found in the Bible.

[8 : 52] Neither is the Word persons. But the idea of Trinity is clearly in the Bible. The teaching is absolutely clear, even if the Word isn't explicit. And there are passages in the New Testament that clearly describe the relations between all three persons. For example, John chapter 14 to 17 and Romans chapter 8, as well as this passage here in 1 Peter chapter 1. Now, so, what do we know about the Trinity, God as three? Well, let's begin with this. That each of the persons is fully God. When we talk about God being three, we're not talking about three gods. And they're not component parts to God. We're not, God's not divided into three.

So, that's the first thing. Each of the persons is God. And then the second thing is that each of the persons is equally God. There's no hierarchy. I think we've all been tempted to believe that somehow when we begin with God the Father, that somehow He's at the top of the tree or the top of the ladder. And then somewhere down below is God the Son. And then somewhere down below Him is God the Spirit. And that's their order of importance or authority. That's not true. It's not true. There is no hierarchy between Father, Son, and Spirit.

There's no subordination between the Son and the Father or the Spirit and the Son. Now, you'll say, I know what you're thinking. I know what you're thinking. You're saying, ah, wait, hold on a minute. Hold on. There is, there are parts of the Bible that do seem to indicate that there is some kind of hierarchy. Like, for example, when Jesus said, the Father is greater than I. Aha, what about that? Didn't He say that? What does that mean? Except that the Father is greater than He is. Or when John's Gospel tells us about Jesus obeying the Father, surely that implies that the Father has an authority over the Son in which Jesus has to obey. That does not imply that there is a hierarchy. It means the way to understand this is to separate out what the Son chose to be in the process of our salvation from what He was and is eternally. He chose at a given point in time to become obedient to the Father. Why? In order to secure our salvation by dying on the cross. Just as at that same point in time, He chose to become a human being with all the limitations that humanity would bring.

So, what we have so far is that we have God as one God and each of them is three persons and each of them is equal to the other. So, what do we know about Father, Son, and Spirit? Well, the Father, let's take it in order, the order that we have it. The Father is the first person. Not because at some point He became a Father. Those of us who are fathers here in this building or watching from home, we became fathers at a certain point of time when our children were conceived. Before that, we were not fathers.

But that's not, it doesn't work like that with God. The Father is always the Father. He is the first person of the Trinity. Now, the second person is given the title, the Son. It doesn't mean that there was a time when the Son wasn't. If you're a son today, there was a time when you didn't exist. And when you came into existence, you came into existence as a son, the son of your Father. That's not the way it works with God. There was no time when Jesus was not. He was always there. He was there from all eternity.

[13 : 32] Now, I know that we don't understand that. Nobody can fully get their heads around this. But that doesn't mean that we don't try. And it doesn't mean that there's no merit in trying to reflect on this greatness and this indescribable God. The third person, of course, is called the Holy Spirit.

Not because he is less God or impersonal. He's not a power or a force. Don't ever talk about the Holy Spirit as it. The Bible calls him he. He. He is as much a divine person. He is as God as the Father.

Father and the Spirit. He's as eternal. He's as holy. He's as unchangeable. He's as almighty as the Father and the Son. Okay, so we've looked at each of the three persons very briefly. We're now going to talk about what they do. Because each of these three persons has a different function that the other persons do not have. But we're going to have to be careful at the same time. Because while we're going to speak separately about Father, Son, and Spirit, we must always remember that there's a mysterious connection between all three that unifies them as God. Remember what Jesus said, I am in the Father and the Father is in me. So whilst we can talk about what Jesus did by himself, and there were some things that Jesus had to do by himself, like dying on the cross, at the same time, we must never separate them to the extent that we separate God. Because you can't do that. God is one God. So let's talk about the Father and what he does. The Father as God the Creator.

You probably expect me to say, well, that's the first thing that God did. And that's the first thing that we find out about God in the Bible. And to some extent, you're right. But actually, there was something before that. There was something that goes all the way back before even creation itself. And that's what we find in Ephesians chapter 1, where we discover that God chose his people before the foundation of the world in love, in Christ, he chose those who were going to be his own. And then, and that was even before Genesis 1, where he created the heavens and the earth and all the planets and all the whole universe. So the very first thing we find out about God is actually that he chose those who were going to be his before the foundation of the world. But then there's Genesis 1, this great chapter, this wonderful opening chapter in which we're introduced right away to the glory of God as he speaks the universe into existence. It's God the Father that does that.

It was God the Father that sent his only begotten Son into the world. When we read that God so loved the world in John 3, 16, that he sent his Son. Well, that's got to be the Father because the Son is the Son with respect to the Father. So God so loved, very often we think wrongly in terms of the love of Jesus without thinking of the love of God the Father. We're wrong. God's love as a Father, as the Father, is equal to Jesus' love for us. And it was him who sent his only begotten Son into the world, the second person of the Trinity. And during the life of Jesus, if you go through the Gospels, he was always conscious of his Father's presence. In fact, there are moments when the Father makes himself known, like when Jesus was baptized and his transfiguration. You remember what happened?

[17 : 45] There was a voice from heaven, this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. And when we think about who is the author or who is the source of our conversion, I hope we're all followers of Jesus. I'm sure that most, if not all of us are. And I hope that if there's anyone here tonight who isn't a follower of Jesus, I hope it's not long before you become one.

And I would invite you to follow this great, great Lord who gave himself for us and loved us. But very often we think, when we look back and when we look at our own lives, we think, well, it's Jesus who is the source of my salvation. Actually isn't. It's God the Father who is the source of your salvation. 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 3, we just read it. He caused us, the Father caused us to be born again to a living hope. He's the one who caused us to be born again. And remember, of course, that it was God the Father that raised up Jesus from the dead and thus giving his divine authoritative endorsement to all that Jesus has done. I hope you're beginning to see the function, the different, slightly different functions that each of the persons of the Trinity have. And this will help us understand God and what God has done. Let's look at the Son, the second person of the Trinity, the person who condescended into the world as Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The Son was sent into the world and he came willingly. Remember that it wasn't God the Father who became a baby. It was the Son who became a baby, specifically the Son. And in so doing, he never left his Godness behind him in heaven. There was no change in the Son when he became the baby. And can you, which is, I've often,

I've probably said this before, that when you are looking, not just at Christmas time, I hope that we go to the manger at Bethlehem at all kinds of different times during the year. I hope maybe even every Sunday we should never, ever lose sight of what God did when he came into this world as a baby. And you're looking at this helpless little crying baby in the arms of his mother Mary. And this is God. He hasn't changed.

He hasn't become something less than God. He has taken his Godness with him. This is God. Helpless though he is. And even more intriguing, like we were looking at this morning, when you're looking at him suffering at Calvary and having to endure such agony on the cross, this is God suffering and giving his life at Calvary. But it's not God the Father. It's God the Son.

Now this begs the question, and I know sometimes, I know that we're kind of stretching our minds tonight, and that's good. That's got to be a good thing. What was God the Father's role at the cross?

[21 : 28] Did he have any role at the cross? We've said that it was Jesus alone who suffered, but did God the Father have any role? Did he have any function at Calvary? Well, we saw this. What did we see this morning? Remember the verse we saw? He made him. God made him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us.

Is he what God is doing? God the Father? He is taking the guilt of our sin, and he is transferring it to Jesus. It was the Father that did that.

And at the same time, it is the Father who is punishing his Son, because he must. Why must he do that? Because if he is not punished, then we have to be punished. If he doesn't die, then we die.

And if there's any hope and salvation for us, it can only be because Jesus took our punishment on the cross, like we saw this morning. But the work of Jesus was not finished.

Even when he rose from the dead, the story isn't finished. He ascended to heaven, and right now, Jesus sits at the Father's right hand. I want us to reflect on that. As we worship God tonight, we are worshiping God in the name of Jesus, who is sitting right now at the Father's right hand, where on our behalf, he is the permanent reminder of the atoning death that he suffered at Calvary, and he continues to make intercession for us. You know, some people get the impression that there's disagreement between God the Father and the Son, in the sense that God the Father is the austere God, the God who loves to punish and to destroy and to condemn. And on the other side, God the Son is always pleading. That's not the way it is at all. There is no disagreement.

[23 : 42] between Father and Son. Jesus is interceding for us. But that happens on the basis of the holes in his hands and the hole in his side, the marks of the crown of thorns on his head, which he still bears, because he's still one of us in heaven.

Let's go on to the third person, the Holy Spirit. What do we know about the Holy Spirit? Is he really God? And if so, how do we know? This is a really important question, because there's a tendency amongst Christians to downplay the role of the Holy Spirit. Of course, there's also a tendency to over-elevate the role of the Holy Spirit. There's two extremes. But let me say, first of all, that the Holy Spirit is fully God, no less God than Jesus or the Father. He is equal in substance to the Father. How do we know? How do we prove that? Well, let me go to one particular passage in Matthew 28, the end of Matthew 28, where Jesus tells his disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It's not names. It's not plural, but the name. There's only one name, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In other words, these three are all God. They're all the same. They're not the same in function, but they're all God. And there are other passages that prove that the Holy Spirit is divine. What then, like we saw with the Father and the Son, what about the Holy Spirit? What does he do? What function does he carry out? Well, if you go back to, for example, the conception of Jesus, where the angel announced to Mary that she was going to become pregnant, how was she going to become pregnant? By the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit overshadowed her. We don't know the exact biological details. We don't need to know, but she became pregnant with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It was also the Holy Spirit that led Jesus from place to place, like into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days. And when Jesus died on the cross, his death is described as an offering, but there's more information than that.

Hebrews chapter 9 and verse 14 tells us, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God and purify our conscience from dead works.

So while we understand that Jesus died alone, and he had to die alone because only he could take our sin, it was through the Holy Spirit that he died as an offering or a sacrifice.

[27:11] And then, of course, the Holy Spirit was sent out on the day of Pentecost. You remember after Jesus rose again and ascended to heaven, and the Holy Spirit was sent out on the day of Pentecost, they were all filled with him. They began to speak in other tongues, and Peter preached with extraordinary power. And it's the Holy Spirit that takes the things that belong to Jesus day by day and makes them known to Jesus' followers. Okay then, so having seen all that, time is gone. What are the implications? What can we learn? How does God help us? How does God as three persons help us in our Christian lives? And how do we respond to this great truth? Well, first of all, it helps us understand why we are relational. God is a plurality of persons, and they act in relation to one another. Remember in Genesis chapter 1, where on the sixth day God said, let us make man. I wonder what he meant by let us make man. Well, we believe that he meant there was this conference within the Godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit, where he said, let us make man. You remember what God said when Adam was created? He said that it is not good for the man to be alone. Why was that? Just because God wanted Adam not to be lonely? No. It is because as man he must reflect the plurality of God so that God creates someone else to reflect that plurality. So he creates a woman to be his companion, to be his soulmate, one of the same kind as him, equal in status and substance. So we believe that also that our salvation, when it came to us being saved, that it was carried out in collaboration within the Trinity.

If you sing Psalm 40, a psalm that we've known and we're quite used to, verse 7 and 8 says this, then I said, behold, I have come in the scroll of the book. It is written of me. I delight to do your will. Oh my God, your law is written in my heart. That's what Jesus said to God the Father.

So that's the first thing then. The second thing is that when we come to worship, whether we're worshiping privately or whether we're worshiping like this as we're gathered together, we worship God as Trinity. And every Sunday we should be, we should have that in mind. We don't just worship one person in the Trinity, but we are conscious of God as Father. And that's why Peter makes a point of drawing this out. We have been chosen of God the Father through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and to be obedient to Jesus Christ. We should be conscious of God the Father amongst us, God the Holy Spirit amongst us, and God the Son. And then when we pray, who do you pray to?

You can say, well, is it right to pray to the Holy Spirit? Well, I can't say that it's wrong to pray to the Holy Spirit. Of course it's not, because the Holy Spirit is God. And yet, there is a certain order, isn't there? When Jesus' disciples asked him, teach us to pray, this is what he said to them, this is what you are to say, our Father in heaven. So the order that Jesus instructed his disciples to pray was to pray was to pray to the Father. Are we conscious of Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Of course we should be. We should be conscious of God as three as we are coming to God in prayer.

But there's more to it than that, because let me just say this in closing, we have a unique relationship with each person in the Trinity. Have you ever thought of that? I want us to close by reflecting on the unique relationship that we have with each person. God the Father has adopted us.

[31 : 59] We are his sons and his daughters, and we have a right to call him our Father in heaven. That is our privilege, and that is our relationship. We are children of God.

But then the New Testament also tells us that the Son has united us to himself. We have a unique relationship with the Son. His death is ours. His resurrection is ours. His ascension is ours. We are in him in heaven. So we have a unique communion with Jesus Christ, as well as a unique communion with God the Father. And then the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us. We are to walk in the Spirit. We are to keep in step with the Spirit as he teaches us, as he reveals Jesus to us, and as he sanctifies us to be more like Jesus, and as we are made ready to meet Jesus and to be with him forever. So we have seen that God is one God, and that he is also three persons, equal in status. Each of the three persons is very God himself. We have also seen that each person, while God has, while each person is God, each person has a slightly different function. But we have also seen that God has drawn us to himself, and he has created a unique bond between him and his people. A bond that can never be broken, and a bond in which, if we are followers of Jesus tonight, and I hope we are, that we can call God our Father, that we can say, I am in Christ, I am united to Christ, and nothing can change that. And the Holy

Spirit dwells within me to take the things that belong to Jesus and to make them mine, and to instruct me, and to teach me in my salvation. That's his word. That's his promise. That's the relationship that we have. And that's what impacts the way in which we live for him in that unique bond that he has created. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we bless you this evening that we can be in Jesus, that we are in Christ, and that we can have fellowship with you, the Father, with the Lord Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit. We pray to dwell within that fellowship. We pray to dwell within the promises that you have made to us. And we pray, Father, Son, and Spirit, that you will dwell with us, and protect us, and teach us, and guide us. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.