

# Our Triune God

Selected Scriptures

Dr. Steve Hereford

This message was Preached on 5/17/06 at Changed By Grace Community Church, 49 N. Bowlan Street, Jacksonville, FL.

© 2006 Steven R. Hereford. All Rights Reserved.



Pastor Steve is the featured speaker on "Changed By Grace" and the author of the How to Study the Bible Workbook and Grace Moments, a daily devotional blog from Changed By Grace. Steve is a graduate of North Florida Theological Seminary (A.Min), Jacksonville Baptist Theological Seminary (Th.B., Th.M), and Logos Graduate School (D.Min) and is the founding Pastor-Teacher of Changed By Grace Community Church in Jacksonville, FL where he serves with his wife, Theresa, and three kids: Jeremy, Naomi, and Karrah. Sermons by Pastor

Steve may be heard on [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com), [oneplace.com](http://oneplace.com) and locally on WAYR AM 550 Sunday's at 8:30 PM.

“On January 7, 1855, the minister of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, England, opened his morning sermon as follows:

‘It has been said by someone that “the proper study of mankind is man.” I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, “Behold I am wise.” But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumb line cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass’s colt; and with solemn exclamation, “I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.” No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. . .

But while the subject humbles the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe. . . . The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently consolatory. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that

subject that I invite you this morning.

These words, spoken over a century ago by twenty-year old C. H. Spurgeon were true then, and they are true now. But the human dilemma is that man does not want to engage in “the most excellent study for expanding the soul,” nor does he want to contemplate “Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity.” Man’s true desire is he wished the God of the Bible did not exist at all and would rather have the god of his own making. Erwin Lutzer, in his book, “Ten Lies About God,” writes:

“‘I believe in God’ is perhaps one of the most meaningless statements we can make today. The word *God* has become a canvas on which each is free to paint his own portrait of the divine; like the boy scribbling at his desk, we can draw God according to whatever specifications we please. For some He is ‘psychic energy’; for others He is ‘whatever is stronger than I am’ or ‘an inner power to lead us to deeper consciousness.’ To say, ‘I believe in God’ might simply mean that we are seeing ourselves in a full-length mirror” (pp.2-3).

Donald McCullough adds: “When the true story gets told, whether in the partial light of historical perspective or in the perfect light of eternity, it may well be revealed that the worst sin of the church at the end of the twentieth century has been the trivialization of God...We prefer the illusion of a safer deity, and so we have pared God down to more manageable proportions” (*Ten Lies About God* by Erwin Lutzer).

How do you see God this evening? Do you see Him as “a safer deity” or a “God of more manageable proportions?” Listen to how these two concepts play out in our society. Some see God as:

A. An Eager Bellhop

1. He’s always there when you need him.
2. He carries your baggage.
3. He never argues with you because you’re in charge.
4. His only responsibility is to make you happy.
5. What he gets from you is: a smile, a thank you, and, if he’s lucky, a tip.

B. A Stern School Teacher

...whose destiny it seems is to ruin a year of your life.

1. He’s the ultimate record keeper who monitors all your activities and gives hard tests to see if his students suffer.
2. He has wants and demands, but seemingly never gives or encourages.

C. An Impersonal Scientist

1. He’s intellectual but not emotional.
2. He spends all his time locked away in his heavenly laboratory working on unknowable

wonders.

D. A Clever Magician

...who must always work through signs, miracles and wonders. If there is no manifestation of power, they conclude God really isn't involved.

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "A wicked and perverse generation seeks after a sign" (Mat.16:4).

E. A Heavenly Grandfather

1. Whose presence is acknowledged.
2. Who is visited occasionally.
3. Who "smiles and tells them he loves them" when they misbehave.

F. Mr. Fix-It

"To view God merely as Mr. Fix-It makes Him worthless for anything else. He's great when were in a fix; but unnecessary when everything is going well" (Points and article from Masterpiece Magazine, Gregg Cantelmo, 6-7).

To view God in this way is painting your own portrait of the Divine," as Erwin Lutzer says. And to do that is nothing short of idolatry. To view God in any way or manner other than what is given in the Bible is idolatry. "Contrary to popular belief, idolatry is more than bowing down to a small figure or worshipping in a pagan temple. According to the Bible, it is thinking anything about God that isn't true or attempting to transform Him into something He isn't" (John MacArthur, Our Awesome God, Introduction, 7). So for us to understand who God is and what He is like, we have to come to the Bible alone. We cannot entertain, "Well, I think God is like..." and our definition be other than what the Bible gives. We must come to the Bible to understand God. I use that term "understand" only to mean that such is only possible with the illumination of the Holy Spirit. We will spend all of our earthly life seeking to understand the infinite God and that alone will be by faith empowered by His Spirit. John Owen has a good comment on this when he says, "There are some truths of God that He has taught us to speak of. He has even guided us in our expressions of them. But when we have done so we do not really fully understand these things. All we can do is believe and admire. We profess, as we are taught that God is infinite, omnipotent, eternal; and we know the discussions about His omnipresence, immensity, infinity and eternity. We have, I say, words and notions about these things; but as to the things themselves, what do we really know? What do we comprehend of them? Can the mind of man do any more than be swallowed up in an infinite abyss and give itself up to what it cannot conceive or express? Is not our understanding 'brutish' in the contemplation of such things?"

We are more perfect in our understanding when we realize that we cannot understand, and rest there. It is just the back parts of eternity and infinity that we see. What shall we say of the Trinity, or the existence of three Persons in the same individual essence? This is such a mystery that it is denied by many, because they cannot understand it. Is it not indeed a mystery whose every letter is mysterious? Who can declare the generation of the Son, the procession of the Spirit, or the difference of the one from the other? Thus, the infinite and inconceivable distance that is between Him and us keeps us in the dark as

to any sight of His face or clear apprehension of His perfections. We know Him rather by what He does than by what He is. We understand His doing us good, but not truly His essential goodness. How little a portion of Him, as Job says, is discovered in this way! (The Mortification of Sin, 94-5).

Commenting on that last paragraph, John MacArthur says, “To define the infinite God in ways we can understand, we often have to state what He is not for a basis of comparison. For example, when we say that God is holy, we mean He has no sin. We cannot conceive of absolute holiness since we’re all too familiar with sin” (Our Awesome God, 8-9). So we have to turn to the only Book that can assist our understanding of God and we have to turn to the author of this great Book in order to know Him. “Knowing what God is like is foundational to knowing God Himself. And knowing God is the essence of being a Christian” (MacArthur, 9). The apostle John wrote, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). To accommodate our understanding of God, let’s begin with His *existence*.

## I. The Existence of God

The Bible does not seek to prove the existence of God, it assumes it.

The Puritan John Preston said, “Now concerning God, two things are to be known: (1) that He is, (2) what He is” (The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations).

### A. It is Assumed in the Scriptures

1. Genesis 1:1 begins like this: “In the beginning God.”
2. Moses, who wrote the book of Genesis also wrote Psalm 90 and in verse 2 He elaborates on the phrase in Genesis 1:1 when he says, “Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.”
3. The apostle John makes an attempt at this in his gospel when speaking of God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He says in John 1:1-2 - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

You must understand when you hear the words “beginning” in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1-2, it is not saying that God has a beginning. In fact both of those verses say nothing about this.

Genesis 1:1 takes us to the beginning of the creation of the heavens and the earth.

John 1:1-2 takes us to the beginning but it’s not referring to the beginning of the Word to assume that He was created or had a beginning. No it is taking us into a realm where our understanding ceases to exist.

The verse would be better read this way: “In the beginning, whenever there was a beginning, the Word!”

Psalm 90:2 states it appropriately: “Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.”

Now, the existence of God is also:

### B. It is Revealed in the Creation

1. We read verses like Psalm 19:1 which says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.”
2. Or Romans 1:19-20 which says, “Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”

3. God has always existed. The Bible does not set out to prove this, it assumes it directly or in creation.

William Temple gives us this warning: “It is much worse to have a false idea of God than no idea at all” (Christianity Today, Vol.34, No.3, September 15, 1989).

### C. It is Proven Theologically

Let me give you 6 arguments that theologians propose:

1. Teleological

This comes from the Greek word *teleios* which means, “perfection,” “result,” or “end.”

When you look at something that has been finished or perfected, we conclude its resulting design must have had a designer. (eg. Watch) Design implies a designer.

2. Ontological

*Ontos* is a Greek participle from the verb translated “to be.”

This argument reasons that man’s ability to conceive of an absolutely perfect Being implies the reality and existence of that Being.

3. Aesthetical

Because there is beauty and truth in the world, it is logical to assume that somewhere in the universe is a standard upon which beauty and truth are based.

4. Volitional

Because man faces a myriad of choices and exercises volition, it is logical to assume that there must be an infinite will somewhere. The world exists as an expression of that will.

5. Moral

That we know there is right and wrong suggests the necessity of an absolute standard.

6. Cosmological

Cosmology is the argument of cause and effect. The world and the universe exist, and we conclude that someone made it. That makes more sense than believing that everything came out of nothing—that at one point nothing equaled all things—which is essentially what the theory of evolution says.

As we carefully examine the world, we learn more about the One who made it.

- a) The cause of limitless space must be infinite
- b) The cause of endless time must be eternal
- c) The cause of perpetual motion must be powerful
- d) The cause of complexity must be omniscient
- e) The cause of consciousness must be personal
- f) The cause of feeling must be emotional
- g) The cause of will must be volitional
- h) The cause of ethical values must be moral
- i) The cause of religious values must be spiritual
- j) The cause of beauty must be aesthetic
- k) The cause of righteousness must be holy
- l) The cause of justice must be just
- m) The cause of love must be loving
- n) The cause of life must be living

Our world gives evidence that there must be a God who is the cause of all those qualities, which are merely reflections of His character. And the Bible substantiates everyone.

Notice now:

## II. The Nature of God

Here is where we look more closely at what the Bible reveals about the Person of God.

There are two ways to look at this: according to man and according to the Bible.

### A. According to Man

Voltaire, who was a French agnostic said, “God created man in His image, and man returned the favor.”

I agree. Man sees God, as we said, as an eager bellhop, a stern school teacher, an impersonal scientist, a clever magician, a heavenly grandfather, and a Mr. Fix-it.

Or they see Him as Plato said as “the eternal mind” or as Albert Einstein said, “a cosmic force in the universe that is unknowable.”

Man does not see God as Jehovah. He refuses and he also cannot unless God reveals Himself to Him.

1 Cor.2:14 says, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

### B. According to the Bible

#### 1. He is a Person

- a) He is described by personal titles
  - (1) In Matthew 6:9 He is referred to as “Father”
  - (2) In Psalm 23:1 He is referred to as the “Shepherd”
  - (3) In James 2:23 He is referred to as a “friend”
  - (4) In Romans 11:34 He is referred to as “Counselor”

These 4 titles are personal and describe personhood.

- b) He is described by personal pronouns

The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures always refer to God as “He,” rather than by “it.” Though Bibles like the TNIV (Today’s New International Version) have sought to change the genders in the Bible.

- c) He is described by personal characteristics

- (1) Isa.55:8 says that He thinks when it says, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord.”
- (2) Genesis 6:7 refers to Him acting when it says, “So the Lord said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.”
- (3) Genesis 1:3 refers to Him speaking when it says, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

Personal titles, personal pronouns, and personal characteristics—all reveal the personhood of God.

Notice what else He is, not only a person but also:

## 2. He is a Spirit

- a) Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not a man.”
- b) John 4:24 says, “God is a Spirit.”
- c) Jesus said in Luke 24:39 that “a spirit does not have flesh and bones.”

Charles Hodge says, “It is impossible...to overestimate the importance of the truth contained in the simple proposition, God is a Spirit. It is involved in that proposition that God is immaterial. None of the properties of matter can be predicated to Him. He is not

extended or divisible or compounded, or visible, or tangible. He has neither bulk nor form...In revealing, therefore, that God is a Spirit, the Bible reveals to us that no attribute of matter can be predicated of the divine essence” (Systematic Theology, 138-9).

Although God is not material, the Bible does describe Him in a material way.

Zech.4:10 refers to “the eyes of the Lord.”

Isa.50:2 refers to His “hand.”

By stating that God has “eyes” and “hands” is not stating that He is material. These are anthropomorphic expressions.

Anthropomorphism comes from anthropos, which means, “man,” and morphe, which means, “form.”

God refers to Himself in human form in order to accommodate our finite understanding.

He is a Person, and a Spirit. He is also:

### 3. He is One

“Although the Bible teaches that there is only one God (Is 45:18, 21-22; Mk 12:32), heathen people in ancient times quickly developed a belief in large numbers of so-called gods (Jer 10:11) and goddesses.

Eventually each nation created and worshiped its own deities, usually more than one. Many of these "foreign gods" (1 Sm 7:3) are named in the Bible, and in most cases we are told to what nation each belonged.

The list from Mesopotamia, a center of idol worship, is the longest: Adrammelech and Anammelech (2 Kgs 17:31), Bel (also known as Marduk, Is 46:1; Jer 50:2; 51:44), Kaiwan (Am 5:26), Nebo or Nabu (Is 46:1), Nergal (2 Kgs 17:30), Nisroch (19:37; Is 37:38), Rephan (Acts 7:43), Sakkuth (Am 5:26), Succoth-benoth (2 Kgs 17:30), Tammuz (Ez 8:14), and Tartak (2 Kgs 17:31).

The Syrians were devoted to Ashima (v 30) and Rimmon (5:18), who was also worshiped under the compound name Hadad-rimmon (Zec 12:11).

Israel's eastern neighbors, Ammon and Moab, worshiped Milcom or Molech (1 Kgs 11:5-7, 33; 2 Kgs 23:13) and Chemosh, respectively, although the Moabites also worshiped a local manifestation of Baal (Nm 25:3-5).

The Philistine gods were Dagon and Baal-zebul (2 Kgs 1:2-3, 6, 16), who is the equivalent of the NT Beelzebul (Mt 12:24; Lk 11:15).

One Canaanite god, Baal, and two Canaanite goddesses, Asherah and Ashtoreth, are

mentioned frequently in the OT; Ashtoreth was the same as the Mesopotamian Ishtar, also known as the "Queen of Heaven" (Jer 7:18; 44:17-19, 25).

The gods of Egypt are represented by only two names in the Bible: Amon (Jer 46:25) and Apis (v 15). Nibhaz (2 Kgs 17:31) was probably an Elamite god.

At least three Greco-Roman deities are mentioned in the NT: the Greek goddess Artemis (Acts 19:24-28, 34-35), known as Diana by the Romans, and the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14:12-13), known as Jupiter and Mercury, respectively, by the Romans.

The Bible clearly teaches that the gods of the nations have no objective reality (Jer 2:11), even though their worshipers sincerely believe that they actually exist (v 28). But the Lord proclaims that "they are no gods," (Jer 2:11; 16:20) or "gods that are not gods" (5:7, NIV). The NT further declares of idols that "an idol has no real existence" (1 Cor 8:4) and that "gods made with hands are not gods" (Acts 19:26). It is not surprising, then, that when the Israelites began to encounter other nations in significant ways—that is, as early as the time of the exodus—they were told repeatedly that the Lord is greater than all other gods (Ex 15:11; 18:11; Dt 10:17; 1 Chr 16:25; 2 Chr 2:5; Pss 86:8; 95:3; 96:4-5; 97:7-9; 135:5, 136:2; Dn 2:47; Zep 2:11).

Such so-called gods were not worthy of Israel's attention or veneration" (Tyndale Bible Dictionary) because there is only one God. And to believe that there were more than one God was blasphemy and idolatry against the One God.

- a) Deut.6:4 says, "The LORD our God is one LORD."
- b) 1 Cor.8:6 says, "There is only one God."
- c) 1 Tim.2:5 says, "There is one God."
- d) Isa.44:6 says, "I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me."
- e) Ex.20:5 reveals that God is a jealous God which means He alone is to be worshiped.

"There can be but one infinite" (Elisha Coles, The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations).

Because Israel lived in the midst of a polytheistic society, it was vital that they give their allegiance to the one true God.

#### 4. He is Three

God is one, yet exists as three distinct persons. That is revealed in the Bible from beginning to end.

- a) The Old Testament expresses the plurality of the Godhead in its opening words

- (1) Genesis 1:1 - “In the beginning God.”

The Hebrew word translated “God” there is Elohim. The plural suffix, *im*, means it’s plural and presents a singular God who is expressed as a plurality.

- (2) Gen.1:26 also presents the plurality of the Godhead which it says, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’”
- (3) Gen.3:22 also uses the plural in the Godhead when it says, “Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.”
- (4) When the Lord was about to destory the Tower of Babel, He said in Gen.11:7, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.”

b) Distinctions between members of the Trinity are apparent in the Old Testament

- (1) Gen.19:24 says, “Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens.”

Charles Hodge says, “We . . . find throughout the Old Testament constant mention made of a person to whom, though distinct from Jehovah as a person, the titles, attributes, and works of Jehovah are nevertheless ascribed. This person is called the angel of God, the angel of Jehovah, Adonai, Jehovah, and Elohim. He claims divine authority, exercises divine prerogatives, and receives divine homage. . . .

Besides this we have the express testimony of the inspired writers of the New Testament that the angel of the Lord, the manifested Jehovah who led the Israelites through the wilderness and who dwelt in the temple, was Christ; that is, the angel was the Word . . . who became flesh and fulfilled the work which it was predicted the Messiah should accomplish (Systematic Theology, p. 177).

- (2) Num.6:22-26 says, “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 23 "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: 24 "The Lord bless you and keep you; 25 The Lord make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; 26 The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace." ' ”

c) Distinctions between members of the Trinity are also apparent in the New Testament

- (1) Mat.3:16-17—As Jesus is being baptized by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove. The Father replied, “is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (v.17).

We see the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together in the same scene.

- (2) Jn.14:16-17—Jesus said, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever--17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”
- (3) 1 Cor.12:4-6 says, “There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.”
- (4) 2 Cor.13:14 says, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”
- (5) 1 Pet.1:2 says, “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied.”

Who can comprehend the Trinity? God is three in one, and one in three-an eternal mystery.

J.I. Packer wrote: “Here we face the most dizzying and unfathomable truth of all, the truth of the Trinity. . . . What should we make of it? In itself, the divine tri-unity is a mystery, a transcendent fact which passes our understanding. . . .How the one eternal God is eternally both singular and plural, how Father, Son, and Spirit are personally distinct yet essentially one . . . is more than we can know, and any attempt to "explain" it-to dispel the mystery by reasoning, as distinct from confessing it from Scripture-is bound to falsify it. Here, as elsewhere, our God is too big for his creatures' little minds (I Want to Be a Christian [Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1977], pp. 29-30).

We cannot comprehend this Triune God, but we do know that He is a Father who loves us, a Son who died for us, and a Spirit who comforts us.

## **CONCLUSION**

Do you know personally this triune God, who is a Person and Spirit? 1 John 5:13 says, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.” You can know this triune God by repenting of your sin and places your trust in Him. What an awesome God! Let’s pray.