



Seeing a World of Difference

Lesson 8

by

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The Truth about God

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“For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity...the truth of God...worship and service of the Creator.” — The Apostle Paul (Romans 1:20, 25)

The Truth about God

In 1993, Robert Müller, Assistant General Secretary of the United Nations and a New Age mystic, affirmed that at the UN, there is no “In the beginning, God created.” His statement tells you a lot about the UN, but not much about God. We examined the god of Oneism in the last lesson. To examine the nature and character of the God of Twoism, the Creator who makes everything and is Himself uncreated, we will consider the programmatic statements that Paul makes in Romans 1 about the true God:

- God is Creator: “...the things that are made;” “...the Creator who is blessed forever;” (Romans 1:20, 25)
- God has incommunicable attributes: “his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature;” “the immortal God;” (Romans 1:20, 23)
- God is Judge: “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men;” (Romans 1:18)
- God is Personal: “the wrath of God;” “God has shown it to them;” “he deserves our thanks;” (Romans 1:18,19,21)

God as Creator

The Bible’s first line is not a heart-warming affirmation that “In the beginning Jesus died for my sins.” It opens with a statement about the nature of the world: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The Bible stakes its reputation on the *fact* of creation, on its *goodness* and on the *necessity* of the Creator, who stands outside of creation as its Maker. German liberal theologians are capable of outlandish heresies, but one Old Testament scholar, Klaus Westermann, got things right. He noted that the Genesis description of creation differs from all other ancient creation stories because Genesis asserts that there is only one Creator and that all else that was or could be, could never be anything but a creature.

British theologian, Colin Gunton, argued that there are only two possible answers to the question of origins: a created universe made by a divine, free, personal agent, or a universe that creates itself. So a German, a Brit and the apostle Paul all agree that there are only two worldview options. What more proof do we need? Creation includes angels, humans, galaxies and the whole of the finite cosmos. Paul says God’s “eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20) can be seen in the creation and express his utter transcendence and otherness. Only God has no beginning. When Harold Bloom says he is “uncreated,” he has rejected his Torah upbringing and, as he proudly

admits, has swallowed the pagan “Gnostic” myth of his own divinity. But Harold had a birthday. And though yours may be more recent than mine, we both have birthdays. Whatever the gurus and shamans tell us, we can never *be* God, because we have a birth date on our *curriculum vitae*.

The world also had a birthday. The Bible hails God as Creator in its very first verse. We hear a ringing echo of that verse in Paul’s argument against Gnostic tendencies in the first century Church: “For everything created by God is good” (1 Timothy 4:4). Six verses later, he adds: “God is the Savior [benefactor] of all” (1 Timothy 4:10), which shows that creation is good for everyone. James, the brother of Jesus, agrees: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). The last book of the Bible reminds us that this truth will continue throughout eternity. In heaven, the living creatures and the twenty-four elders praise God for being the Creator: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Revelation 4:9–11).

The Bible’s First and Last Word

In Romans 1, Paul issues an indictment against humanity. Because God’s “eternal power and divine nature...are clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world ... [human beings] are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). The cosmos is the work of a sovereign and holy Creator, a reflection of his character and power, as well as the theater of his glory. Yet unbelievers fail to give God thanks (Romans 1:21). Can one be thankful without thanking *someone*? It makes no sense to thank a system, so if you get rid of God, you can only thank nature, whose divinity you share, so you are basically thanking yourself.

Perhaps this is why atheistic scientists, dissatisfied with the “orthodoxy” of fairy-tale evolution, often turn to some form of theistic realism. Nobel laureate Dr. Francis Crick (co-discoverer of the structure of DNA) came close. An atheist, Crick admitted that the odds that chance events caused the universe were so astronomical as to be ludicrous. He came to believe that life appeared almost as a miracle and that the evolutionary theory, on which he had based his life, was impossible. He speculated that Earth may have been “seeded” by a visitation of intelligent beings from another planet. This whimsical theory displaces, but does not solve the problem.

What has science done for us, if its prizewinners run from the scene, leaving us with fairy tales? Having “clearly perceived” the true character of the created universe, Crick, for one, must admit that theories of evolution are inadequate before the mystery of a disturbingly intelligent cosmos. Remember the reaction of the humanist woman before the Grand Canyon? Like thousands who gaze on the splendor of the Canyon, she “clearly perceived” the Creator’s hand, but did not thank him. The late English astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle, who coined the term “Big Bang,” was more courageous than Crick. In spite of his atheism, he stated that the idea of the origin of life by chance is absurd. He calculated the chances of randomly obtaining the required set of enzymes for even the simplest living cell to be 1 in 1,040,000. The number of atoms in the known universe is ridiculously small by comparison. Hoyle also argued that a fifteen billion-year-old universe is too short for the chance formation of complex higher life forms. The random emergence of the simplest cell, he said,

would be like a tornado sweeping through a junkyard and assembling a Boeing 747. He concluded that the amazing cellular order of the natural universe had to be the outcome of an external intelligent design, a theory so obvious he wondered why it was not widely accepted as self-evident. Philosopher **Antony Flew** (1923–2010) was long considered the greatest atheist of the twentieth century. Just before his eighty-first birthday, however, Flew became a theist. Noting that even Albert Einstein believed in an Intelligence behind the complexity of the physical universe, Flew embraced the notion of intelligent design, believing it impossible for evolution to account for the fact that one single cell can carry more data than the combined volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica. These great minds jettisoned the fantasy of a chance universe in favor of the “common sense” idea that the world was designed intelligently. Fred Hoyle’s question reverberates in the philosophical air: Why is this not widely accepted as self-evident?

The popular Harvard biologist, **Stephen Jay Gould**, sees order, even holiness, in the creation. Gould admitted in 1977 that the extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record constituted “the trade secret of paleontologists.”¹ This is not the place to discuss the flaws in Darwinian evolution (e.g., problems in the fossil record, the evolution of organic from inorganic matter, how male and female evolved at all, let alone simultaneously, assuring reproduction and the survival of the species). Evolutionary theory leaves so many essential questions unanswered that attachment to it cannot be due to scientific argument. **Dr. Michael Ruse**, an ardent evolutionist and ex-Christian, author of *Darwinism Defended: A Guide to the Evolution Controversies*, freely admits that evolution is promoted as more than science—it is a religious ideology. Starring the droll Ben Stein in blazer, tie, shorts and sneakers, the movie *Expelled* uncovers with Colombo-style “dumb” questions, how the religiously doctrinaire evolutionists maintain a stranglehold on the academy in the name of science. “Following the evidence where it leads”—as scientists are presumably trained to do—can cost you your job if you buck the reigning orthodoxy of naturalism. Off-limits to young students is the “unspeakably holy” ground on which some of the best scientific minds have finally stood—where Paul says we all stand, without excuse, before the evidence of God as Creator. As far as I know, Crick, Hoyle and Flew never turned to the God of the Bible.

God’s Incommunicable Attributes (Romans 1:20, 23)

The ancient gods of Greece and Rome were like humans on steroids. Modern pagans, like Shirley MacLaine, don’t hesitate to make the astounding statement, “I am God.” Not many people worship Jupiter or Shirley, and they would be wise not to put their hopes in such gods. The biblical God is truly worth worshiping. He is unique, stunningly complex, powerful and wise. In light of this uniqueness, which gives the Bible a “ring of truth,” theologians have spoken of God’s

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Richness of Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 263–4.

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“incommunicable attributes.” This doesn’t mean that God can’t communicate (after all, he invented communication) but that he has qualities that we neither share nor comprehend.

- God is independent; we are dependent.
- God is eternal; we have a beginning.
- God is immutable; we change.
- God is infinite; we are finite.
- God is all-powerful (omnipotent); we are not.
- God is all-knowing (omniscient); our knowledge is limited.
- God knows things before they happen; we have no sure knowledge of the future.
- God’s presence is felt in every nook and cranny of the cosmos (omnipresent); we are limited in space and time.
- God is absolute; we are relative.
- God is perfect being; we are derivative beings.

The first part of each statement cannot be applied to human beings. MacLaine, Bloom and others are silly enough to think they can, but we all know how ludicrous it is to say, “I am eternal,” or “I am totally independent,” or “I am everywhere.” God *can* say this, because it is true of him. Who would want to worship a God *without* such qualities? The paltry little god we see in the mirror each morning inspires neither worship nor awe! As the wrinkles appear on Shirley’s aging face, she doubtless has the same problem. The “incommunicable attributes” of the real God, as he reveals himself in Scripture, make him fundamentally different from the things and persons he made. Let’s examine a few of these qualities more closely.

The Alterity of God

You know the phrases “alter ego” or “alternative solution.” “Alter” means “other,” so “alterity” is a good description for God because he is “other.” Moses says to Pharaoh: “There is no one like the Lord our God” (Exodus 8:10). Moses is not offering Pharaoh one more tribal deity for his collection. God is totally other and distinct. It was Moses who wrote Genesis 1:1, remember. The special name for God, Yahweh, “I am who I am,” which doubtless means, “I am the self-existent one,” is never employed for other gods in a generic sense. The gods of paganism are pantheistically identified with everything in creation and with all other gods. The “I am” God has his own name and his own existence, and can be found nowhere else but “there.” Solomon says it this way: “But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (2 Chronicles 6:18, NIV). The Psalmist also captures this truth: “Who is like the Lord our God, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?” (Psalms 113:4–6). “There is none holy like the Lord; there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God” (1 Samuel 2:2).

Like a critic previewing *Lion King*, the prophet Isaiah puts the record straight: “He [the Lord] sits enthroned above the circle of the earth” (Isaiah 40:22). God is above, beyond and outside the earth, because he existed before it and created it. God is not an element within the circle of life, as Disney

likes to say. “The blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords...whom no one has ever seen or can see,” has his own unique domain of divine existence, a dwelling of “unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:15–16).

These are lofty notions, but we all desire to worship something greater than and different from ourselves. A transcendent God is the only one I *can* worship—a God who blows my circuits. True knowledge of this God must be a special knowledge that goes beyond a common, natural knowledge. Oneist worship of nature gives an impression of transcendence, but quickly becomes boring, since our “thoughts and prayers” never get farther than the ceiling of creation. The circle of life is a closed system, in which the “heavens” are like brass. In other words, praying to a force is useless!

The Omnipresence of God

God’s great difference doesn’t stop him from being everywhere present in the world. God is omnipresent in a number of ways. Because he is spirit and doesn’t have a body, he is not bound by the limits of space. God has the eyes of a hawk, so to speak. Here are just a few of the Bible’s many affirmations that nothing gets by God:

- The Lord’s throne is in heaven; his eyes see...the children of man. (Psalms 11:4)
- His eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps. (Job 34:21)
- He rules by his might forever...[his] eyes keep watch on the nations. (Psalms 66:7)
- In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. (Psalm 95:4)
- God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life. He gives them security, and they are supported, and his eyes are upon their ways. (Job 24:22-23)

God is everywhere present, not just as Lord but as an owner who cares for his creatures. God watches over us both in judgment and in tender care. His own hands made creation, and he claims rightful ownership and control over it. Nothing happens that is out of his control.

The Aseity or the Independence of God

God is not dependent on anything within creation and will only swear by himself (Isaiah 45:23; Jeremiah 22:5; Hebrews 6:13). The role of creation is to “declare the glory of God” (Psalms 19:1, 2–5), and the whole earth is filled with it (Psalms 72:19), but God will not share his glory with the heavens or anything else (Isaiah 42:8). “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Hebrews 2:20).

There is a kind of glory “due his name” alone (Psalms 29:2). That is why he declares in Exodus 20:5, “I the Lord your God am a jealous God.” This is not a *pique* of egotistical pride, but a statement made in the context of idolatry. His people fail to see the distinction between God and creation. In our text (Romans 1:23), Paul says that humans willingly exchange the glory of this majestic God for images

of human beings and animals (see Psalms 106:20) and thus attempt to undermine God's unique person.

The Immutability of God

You may have read stories or seen movies in which mutants morph into weird forms. God is "immutant." Addressing an audience of West Coast beach people on the arcane subject of God's incommunicable attributes, Dr. Jones sensed that he was losing them, so he said, "If anyone has one of these attributes, I'll give you a free book." An athletic guy in his early forties came up afterwards and said to him, "You owe me a book. My wife says I never change!" He got the audience laughing, but changelessness is no joke when applied to God. In the last book in the Old Testament, God assures us of his faithfulness by saying: "I, the Lord, do not change" (Malachi 3:6). No one else can make that statement.

We see the same attribute in Psalms 110:4, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind." Changelessness is inherent to God's being. James 1:17 describes God as "the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Shadows change as light moves. We who have birthdays also have shadows. We stand in the way of light, blocking it to produce a shadow. God has no birthday and is not subject to the change of time. Light is not behind him, but ceaselessly issues from him. In his independence from Creation, God sheds light on us, both spiritually and physically. "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:19).

The Infinity/Eternity of God

Paul describes God in our text as "the immortal God" comparing him to "mortal man" (Romans 1:23). This agrees with other Scriptures that reveal a God who has no beginning and no end (Hebrews 1:12). No human being can ever be God. God "alone has immortality" (1 Timothy 6:16). Beware of any system that tells you that you can become God. About four thousand years ago, Abraham "called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God" (Genesis 21:33). Three thousand years ago, the Psalmist declared: "Are you not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One?" (Habakkuk 1:12). You are the God who "sits enthroned forever..." (Psalms 9:7; 45:6). Psalms 90:2 describes God's existence before his act of creating the vast but finite cosmos: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."

Harold Bloom probably read these psalms as a youngster, since he grew up in a Jewish home and prepared for his bar mitzvah. His conversion to paganism, causing him to exult, "I am uncreated, as old as God," shows just how antithetical these two ways of conceiving of God really are. Whom do you wish to worship, the God of the Bible, Harold Bloom or maybe the twelfth century Christian mystic, **Meister Eckhart**, who claimed that there was "something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable"? Whether he knew it or not, Eckhart was claiming one of the incommunicable attributes of God, thus reflecting a pagan understanding of God.

God as Judge

God as Judge is not strictly an incommunicable mystery of his being, because we have a sense of justice and can judge others (much to their dislike). God is a qualitatively different Judge, however, because he is the transcendent and holy Creator. His judging is part of his condescension or humiliation, as he reaches down to creatures in righteousness and gives us a conscience and a sense of right and wrong. We tend to squirm when we read the opening statement of the passage we are studying: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). When we hear the word “wrath,” we think of an irate father losing his temper with his son and smacking him “upside the head,” as the expression goes. This human anger has nothing to do with divine wrath. The prophet Habakkuk speaks to God as “you who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hebrews 1:13). God’s judgment is not capricious or hasty, but pure and righteous. Because of human rebellion, the gracious revelation of the transcendent God to fallen creatures is necessarily the revelation of his wrath. One of those fluffy, soft, pure white hotel towels, set against the ones we’ve been using and washing for years in my home, would show how shabby ours are! God’s purity, by its very existence, judges our shabbiness. Without ultimate justice, earthly life would be hell. In the world of pagan Oneness, there is no judgment, present or final, because there is no notion of sin or of a personal God who could be offended. In biblical Twoism, righteous judgment is fundamental, for it infuses the cosmos with personal, moral significance, constantly calling humanity to a higher standard.

God the Creator is not dressed up, disguised as a benign Mother Nature. We implicitly know God as Judge because we know he has created the moral order. Paul reminds the pagans of his day that while their belief system denies the possibility of a moral universe, they daily accuse their friends and neighbors of “injustice.” Our awareness of morality reminds us that God is Creator. As Paul says in Romans 2:1, “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.” Paul starts with a “therefore” because he is referring back to what he has already said: we know about the divine Creator, but deny the evidence.

We all feel the force of Paul’s accusation. We live in a moral universe we did not create, and we must act as if morality exists, for only then is human life bearable. Ultimately, the moral standard pressing in on us is holiness, which is the essence of the created life in which we live.

Wrath and Holiness

When you hear the word “holy,” you may think of people like **Mother Teresa**, who choose an altruistic lifestyle and have an impeccable public record. This is a misconception. The root meaning of “holy” is “set apart for a specific function in a rightful place.” God is holy because he has a distinct “place,” separate from the creation, with a very different form of existence. Anyone claiming to be a “Jesus follower” should note that this is what Jesus believed about God. In Matthew 6:9, Jesus says that God is the Father in heaven (in his own place, with his own form of existence), distinct from the

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creation. By respecting that as we pray, we hallow or render holy God's name. But God is not the only one to have a holy place. Creatures also have distinct, holy places. God's work of creation makes a cosmos by establishing distinctions, by separating things out and by giving each thing—plants, angels, animals, the earth or people— its special place and function. This understanding of holiness lies at the root of biblical morality. Maintaining divinely ordered distinction is the *sine qua non* of a holy cosmos. The unholy appears when Adam and Eve attempt to cross the line between "creaturehood" and the divine Creator. Maintaining these created distinctions is the guiding principle of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2-17.

1. "You shall have no other gods before me," separates the true God from the false.
2. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image," separates worship of the transcendent God from idolatry.
3. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," means that God's name must not be confused with created things, but must be hallowed in its heavenly reality.
4. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth," distinguishes one day from all the others and shows the difference between creational work and rest.
5. "Honor your father and your mother," sets apart fathers, mothers and children for their specific familial role.
6. "You shall not murder," underlines the holy character and distinct identity of each created person.
7. "You shall not commit adultery," shows that marriage itself is "set apart" by God.
8. "You shall not steal," indicates the way in which property is set apart as belonging to an individual.
9. "You shall not bear false witness," shows how important God finds the distinction between truth and falsehood.
10. "You shall not covet," indicates not only the above principle of private property, but also our submission to God's design in giving us all the good things we need for our particular "set apart" service for him.

Imagine yourself in a room full of friends and acquaintances. You're sitting up front, watching a large screen on the wall. Suddenly, instead of the movie you thought you were going to watch, you see yourself as a two-year old, stomping your feet and shouting, "No," at your mother. Then you are eight years old, taking the lunch money out of the teacher's desk...and so it goes. There is also a voice over—your own voice speaking the thoughts that went through your mind. All your evil thoughts and actions, your lies, your lust, your hate, your pride, your anger, your subtle and not-so-subtle betrayals of enemies and friends—all are projected for everyone to see. And they are all true. That is a picture of final judgment. You are without excuse, because those Ten Commandments are not some ancient code. They are written on your heart (Romans 2:16). God's holy law, written into the cosmos and on our conscience, is plain to see.

That scene is scary, yet even scarier would be a universe without laws, without ethical norms, conscience, accountability or guilt. The popularity of crime series on TV shows how eager we are to see the criminal found and punished. Without moral structures, we would become like the children in William Golding's novel, *Lord of the Flies* (literally, Beelzebub), stranded on a desert island, devouring one another.

The revelation of God's just wrath has a present and a future aspect. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven" (Romans 1:18) because God is still giving people over to their rebellion (Romans 1:24-27). That's why we see behavior even more shocking than that in Golding's novel. God's righteous judgment "will be revealed" in the future day of wrath, however (Romans 2:5). Just as the Holy Spirit gives believers present proof of future glory, so present judgment is a down payment on the judgment of the final day. The present "giving over" shows God's "divine forbearance," that is, his divine patience (Romans 3:25), giving sinners a chance to see the effects of their sin and to come in repentance to Christ for salvation. God arranges all things so that "every mouth will be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (Romans 3:19), but also so that we will seek "the righteousness of God revealed apart from the Law" (Romans 3:21). That righteousness is available to us through faith in Jesus Christ, whereas the Law can only condemn us.

God is Personal as Trinity

You may be bothered by terms like "wrath," "Lie" and "Truth." However, if we really do live in a personal, moral universe, such terms are unavoidable. We will one day stand before the Maker of all things to give a final accounting. Describing the options as the Truth and the Lie and declaring the ultimate issues to be of vital personal and eternal significance makes sense, even as it makes us uncomfortable!

There are no holy distinctions in a world of Oneism. Even good and evil cannot be distinguished and we should give equal respect to both. In the Oneness soup, there are no alphabet noodles—no names, no you! Personal identity vanishes into the black hole of impersonal union. Not so in a reality that begins with the divine as personal.

One mainline minister said that we don't need such a complicated doctrine as the Trinity anymore. Wrong! We have never needed it more, for it is at the very core of the biblical revelation of God and unique among the religions of the world. The onrush of both paganism and Islam, for whom Trinity has no meaning (also true of Judaism), makes the distinctiveness of biblical revelation shine. The Trinity puts personhood at the very center of existence, originating with God. God is not a solitary being, eternally lonely until he creates us. God is independent and does not need us, because he is both one and three. I cannot explain this, but I see its absolute importance—a godhead made up of three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, existing in personal communion forever. This Trinitarian God establishes my sense of personal identity within reality. The distinction between the creature and the Creator reflects the very nature of God, in which divine distinctions are maintained within an organic personal unity.

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You may think Twoism is just as fanciful as pagan utopian hopes. We *are* at the limits of human comprehension, but a God of endless majesty and complexity is the only being worth worshiping. That God became Man does not make us gods, but it does make Jesus' death infinitely valuable. Given our mortality and moral weakness, if such a God does not exist, we are left with pagan fantasies that promise a perfect world and wish away evil by redefining it as good. Even Charlie Brown would not be so gullible. Our hopes lie in what the God from the outside has done to solve guilt, sin and death. In lesson 15, we will look in depth at that solution, but first let us examine Paul's argument that our beliefs about God determine our spiritual practice. Spirituality is not neutral, nor are all spiritualities the same. Just as the two objects of worship (nature or the Creator) are antithetically different, so are the spiritual practices that serve them.