

BRUCE A. WARE



Big Truths for Young Hearts

Teaching and Learning the
Greatness of God



Big Truths for Young Hearts

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Contents

Foreword	11
Introduction: On Raising Children to Know and Love God through Raising Them to Know and Love Theology	13
1 God's Word and God's Own Life as God	17
God Has Made Himself Known	18
God Talks—The Bible Is God's True and Lasting Word	21
God Is God Apart from Us	24
God Is God with Us	27
Some Truths about God's Richness That Make Him God	30
Some Truths about God's Kindness That Make Him God	33
2 God as Three in One	37
There Is Only One God	38
One God in Three Persons	41
The Father Is God	44
The Son Is God	47
The Holy Spirit Is God	51
How the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Relate	54
3 Creator and Ruler of All	59
Who Made the World? God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) Did	60
God Rules the World He Has Made	63
God Provides All Good Things in the World	66
God Controls All Bad Things in the World	70
Our Responsibility in the World God Controls	73
Pain and Suffering in the World God Controls	77

4	Our Human Nature and Our Sin	81
	Men and Women, Boys and Girls—God’s Masterpieces	82
	What It Means to Be Made in God’s Image	85
	Other Features of Being Human	88
	How Sin Came into Our World and What Sin Is	92
	How Sin Has Spread to All People	95
	The Punishment for Our Sin	98
5	Who Jesus Is	103
	A Person Who Was Alive Long Before He Was Born	104
	The Incarnation—God and Man Together	107
	How Jesus Emptied Himself in Becoming Also a Man	110
	Jesus Lived in the Power of the Spirit	113
	Jesus Resisted Temptation, Living a Sinless Life	117
	What Christians of the Early Church Came to Believe about Christ	120
6	The Work That Jesus Has Done	125
	Jesus’ Death Shows God’s Justice and His Mercy toward Our Sin	126
	Jesus Paid the Full Penalty for Sin	129
	Jesus’ Victory over Satan by His Payment for Sin	132
	Jesus’ Resurrection: The Proof That Christ’s Death for Sin Worked	135
	Jesus Is King over All	139
	But Is Jesus Really the Only Savior?	142

7	The Holy Spirit	147
	The Work of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament Times	148
	Old Testament Promises of Future Spirit Transformation	151
	The Spirit on Jesus and on Jesus' Followers	155
	The Holy Spirit Gives New Life in Christ	158
	The Holy Spirit Unites Believers Together in Christ	161
	The Holy Spirit Fills Believers to Live for Christ	164
8	Our Great Salvation	169
	God's Kindness and Wisdom in Choosing Some to Save	170
	"Sirs, What Must I Do to Be Saved?"	173
	Declared Right in God's Eyes When We Believe	176
	Made More Like Christ through All of Our Lives	180
	Saved <i>by</i> Good Works? No—Saved <i>for</i> Good Works? Yes	183
	But Must People Know about and Believe in Christ to Be Saved?	187
9	The Church of Jesus Christ	191
	Jesus Is the Lord of the Church	192
	A People of the New Covenant	195
	Communities of Christians Who Worship and Serve Together	198
	Baptism: Picturing Jesus' Death and Resurrection	202
	The Lord's Supper: Remembering Jesus' Death and Resurrection	205
	Growing the Church through Making Disciples	209

10	What Will Take Place in the End	213
	Knowing the Future Helps in the Present	214
	What Happens to Grandma When She Dies?	217
	The Promise-Keeping God and the Salvation of Israel	220
	Jesus Will Come Again	224
	The Suffering of Hell and the Joys of Heaven	227
	God's Greatness and Glory Shown Forever and Ever	231

Introduction:

On Raising Children to Know and Love God through Raising Them to Know and Love Theology

The beginnings of this book go back nearly twenty years, to when I was teaching theology at Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon. Bethany was six, Rachel was two, and I recall Jodi and me trying to figure out just how best to get two fun-loving, giggly girls to bed in a way that kept our sanity but didn't distract from the sheer happiness they enjoyed that last hour before sleep came upon them both. One night it occurred to me that since they loved being with us this last part of the day and weren't quite ready for sleep yet, I might consider co-opting the time and using it to do what I loved most and what they needed most (though they wouldn't have known this yet)—teach them great and glorious truths of the Christian faith!

What began in those evenings turned into something better than I had planned or envisioned. Surely God led in this despite my mere “play it by ear” endeavor to make something work. I began in those early years spending ten to fifteen minutes with each of our daughters at their bedside, going through the doctrines of the Christian faith. Of course, I didn't explain to them that I was basically teaching them the same theology sequence I taught at seminary, but that is exactly what I did. We started with the Bible's teaching on divine revelation and looked at some key passages about God's revelation in creation and in our consciences and then his remarkable revelation through his Word, both the living Word, Jesus, and the written Word, the inspired Scriptures. We would read a key text or two and then talk about what it means. I'd work at giving explanations they could understand, and it became apparent to me right away when they got it and when they didn't. Facial expressions and questions from children say much about whether they are grasping the ideas and see both their truth and their beauty. When we finished one area of theology, we'd move on to the next, with no set time and no deadlines, so we just enjoyed reading Scripture and thinking about these areas one by one. As

Introduction

much as I longed to convey truth that would help shape their minds and worldviews, I also prayed deeply that God would be pleased to enable them to see the glory and beauty of these precious truths. Mind and heart are both essential in this process, and I knew I must constantly trust God to do this work in them, a work that only he can bring to pass.

I have Bethany and Rachel to thank for the encouragement to write out more formally the kinds of talks we had at bedtimes as well as other discussions we enjoyed on long vacations in the car and for family devotions. Both girls really loved to talk about these matters. Jodi, my precious wife of thirty years, cultivated in them a love for reading Scripture and worked with them to become consistent in their own daily devotions. So when my girls came to me with the idea of writing up our theology discussions, I realized almost immediately that this was something I needed to do. Through their regular encouragement, it now is such a joy to see this book come to pass. Rachel's original suggested title for the book was *Bedside Theology*, recalling obviously the many bedside discussions we had over several of her growing up years. For good reasons, a different title was chosen. Nevertheless, I will always think of this book primarily as the outgrowth of the many bedside theology talks this dad had the joy of having with his precious and much-loved daughters.

In light of the background and history I've just shared, I wish to dedicate this book to Bethany Christina and Rachel Elizabeth. Jodi would want to join me in saying that we have dearly loved and prized the privilege the Lord gave us in being your mom and dad. You've enriched our lives and taught us much, even as we've sought to pass on to you what means the very most to us. Thank you both for the constant love and encouragement you've shown to us. You have both grown now into beautiful and godly women who adorn so well the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank God also for the godly and gifted husband that Owen Strachan is to Bethany and for their first child, and our first grandchild, precious Ella Rose. We never will cease to pray for all of you that God will continue his work in your lives, granting you more of the vision of God we've so loved and cherished and longed for you to know as well. May you continue always to know him more richly, love him more deeply, and serve him more fully.

I'm aware that this book may be used in different contexts than the precise one out of which it has grown. Yes, parents may wish to read these chapters with their children, discussing these rich truths together and looking at passages of Scripture that teach aspects of our faith that

Introduction

we need to understand and embrace. Middle and high school students may find it helpful simply to read the book on their own, working bit by bit through some of the core teachings of Scripture on the great doctrines of the Christian faith. Homeschool and Sunday school settings are also places where this book may meet a need. Since it covers the whole range of Christian doctrine, from the doctrine of the Bible all the way through to the doctrine of last things, some may wish to use this as an introductory curriculum for young people to gain a foundational understanding of the whole of the Christian faith. Perhaps also young converts to the Christian faith, no matter what age they may be, will find here a helpful overview of Christian teaching that will give them a better grasp of the truth and beauty God is and has for them to behold.

However this book is used, I hope and pray that God will be pleased to shine forth something of the greatness of his glory, both in who he is as the eternal triune God and in the wisdom and beauty of his work and his ways. God alone is worthy of all glory, honor, worship, praise, and thanksgiving since he alone possesses every quality and perfection that deserves to be so honored. Since to him alone belongs all adoration and worship, to him alone, then, is here given all glory and thanks. May God be pleased to use the truths of this work for the glory of his name, and may his people grow in understanding God as the supreme treasure of their lives.

1

God's Word and
God's Own Life
as God





God Has Made Himself Known

Has anyone ever kept a secret from you? Maybe it was a birthday present or a special trip you were going to take or what your mom was planning to fix for dinner. If you've had this happen to you, then you can understand how important it is for others to tell us things that we cannot know unless they make it known. No matter how much you might want to know the secret, until someone tells you, you just cannot know what it is.

It is this way with knowing who God is. The only way that we could be thinking together about the greatness of God in this book is because God has shared with us the secret of who he is. We cannot discover who God is or figure him out on our own. We aren't smart enough to do this, and God is way too big for us even to try. One of the very first things we must learn about God is very humbling, and it is this: unless God had decided to show us who he is, unless he had chosen to make known his own life and ways, we simply could know nothing—yes, nothing!—about him. We are dependent completely on God's kindness and goodness to make himself known to us, and for this we ought to be grateful every day of our lives. After all, there is no one more important and more wonderful to know than God. So how thankful we must be that God did not keep to himself, as it were. Rather, he showed us in rich and wonderful ways just who he is.

The Bible talks about several different ways that God has made himself known to us. One of the ways God has shown us some things about himself is through *the world he has made*. Psalm 19:1–2 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” And in Romans 1:19–20 Paul adds, “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” As these passages teach, some

God Has Made Himself Known

of the very qualities of God's own life are shown through the world and the universe that he fashioned.

Think with me about some of the qualities of God that we can see by looking at different parts of the world in which we live. When you look closely at a flower, for example, you can see the knowledge and wisdom and beauty of God. How very, very smart God is! God is the one who figured out how to make living things grow, and they all grow according to a lot of very complicated rules that he put into every living thing. The flower we are thinking about came from a small seed, was planted in the ground and watered, and in time grew to be a beautiful, colorful flower. All of its beauty, and each of its parts, has come to be because God has designed just exactly how it would grow from that seed to the full flower. Indeed, God's knowledge is vast, his wisdom is beyond our ability to understand, and his beauty is shown in all of the beautiful flowers, butterflies, trees, and mountains of our world.

We've thought about something on the small side—a flower—so why don't we also consider something big. Think with me about the stars you can see at night. Maybe you live in the country where there are not many city lights, or maybe you've taken a trip out into the woods or to the top of a mountain. On a clear night, when you see all of those stars, it sort of takes your breath away, doesn't it? And to think that we can see only a very, very small number of the stars that are actually there. Just in our own galaxy (the Milky Way) where the earth and solar system are located, scientists estimate that there are about ten billion stars. And the Milky Way is an average-sized galaxy in a universe that contains hundreds of millions of galaxies. Wow! We cannot understand all of this, but it shows us how great and expansive and powerful God is—he made this universe simply by speaking it into existence. Yes, the heavens surely do tell us of the glory of God. His power and wisdom and beauty and greatness—indeed, his Godness—are all seen through what he has made.

Do you remember the story of Job? Job was a very wealthy and powerful man, but to test Job, God allowed Satan to take nearly everything from Job, even giving him sores and boils on his whole body. Job wondered why this happened to him, and he came very close to blaming God. Toward the end of the book of Job, God confronted Job and humbled this man who nearly accused God of doing what was wrong. God asked of Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?⁶ On what were its bases sunk,

God Has Made Himself Known

or who laid its cornerstone,⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?⁸ Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb,⁹ when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band,¹⁰ and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors,¹¹ and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?’” (Job 38:4–11). Consider the greatness of the universe God made, and how detailed and exact everything is that God has fashioned! We truly do learn much about God’s greatness and glory just by noticing the world all around us.

Another way God has made himself known is through *how he has made us*, his human creatures. Many things about our own bodies—how amazing are our eyes and ears and heart and brain and on and on—also tell us about God’s wisdom and power, just as with the rest of creation. But in addition to this, God has made us with a deep inner understanding of things that are right and things that are wrong. When we lie to our brother or sister or to our parents, we can tell inside of us that this is wrong to do. When we clean up our room or take out the garbage when our mom or dad ask us to, we know in our heart that this is the right thing to do. Where did this inner understanding of right and wrong come from? In Romans 2:14–15 Paul writes, “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.” His point is this: people who don’t even have someone telling them that it’s wrong to lie or wrong to steal or wrong to murder still know in their own hearts about these things. God has taken something of his own standards of right and wrong and placed them in every human heart. So, not only is God powerful and wise and great, he also is holy and righteous and good. When we do wrong, we have no excuse, because we know from the inside that we should do what is right. God put this into our lives so we would know about right and wrong and so we would know that we are held responsible for what we do. But this also tells us about God—he always does what is right and good and worthy of praise. God is both great, and he is good.

Questions for Thought

1. Can you think of some parts of creation that show just how great or powerful or wise or beautiful God is? What do they show about God, and how do they do this?

God Talks

2. Have you ever noticed that little voice of your conscience within you warning you not to do something wrong or encouraging you to do what is right? Can you think of any examples from the past week when you noticed this?

Memory Verse

Psalm 19:1—“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”



God Talks—the Bible Is God’s True and Lasting Word

We’ve just learned that God has made known to us something of himself both through the world he has made and through the sense of right and wrong that he put into every human life. God’s greatness, wisdom, power, and beauty are shown in the created world. And God’s holiness, righteousness, goodness, and justice are shown through the senses of right and wrong we all have. So yes, God is both great, and God is good. He acts with power, but he always does what is right.

Notice, though, that both of these ways that God has made himself known to us come through his actions—we know he is great and good because we see these qualities shown in what he has made. But there is another amazing way that God has made himself known to us, and it is this: God talks! One of the first things we learn about God in the opening chapter of the Bible is that God is a talking God. For each of the days of creation, he brings about what he makes by speaking. Have you noticed this? The first one comes in Genesis 1:3, “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” And the words, “And God said” are repeated in verses 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, and 26, where each of the special acts of creation are brought about when God speaks. We learn from this that

God Talks

God's word is powerful and active, and it is meant to create what is new and glorious, not only to instruct.

Knowing that God is a talking God helps us understand better one of the most important and precious possessions we have in all of life—our Bible. We can far too easily ignore the Bible or spend too little time reading it and learning from it. But when we realize what it really is, we desire to spend much more time learning just what the Bible says. Why? Because the Bible is where we hear what God says. Yes, it is true. What the Bible says is what God says; as the Bible speaks to us, God speaks to us. One of the most important ways that God has spoken is through the very pages of the Bible itself. Consider with me a few verses that help us see this.

Paul describes the Bible this way in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Notice that Paul says “all” of Scripture—not just part of it, but all of it—comes from God. So we should see the Bible as a different kind of book from any other book there is. In the entire Bible, God tells us what he wants us to know. Not just parts of the Bible come from God, but all of it is God's own word to us. Also, notice that the Bible is “breathed out by God.” This is a way of saying that it comes from God's own mouth. God speaks and breathes out the very books that form the Bibles that we have. Of course, human writers are responsible for writing these books also (we'll say a bit more about this in a minute), but here Paul's main point is that the Bible should be seen as God's Word.

Look next at what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:13: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” This helps us because Paul shows that the word spoken to these Thessalonian believers really was God's Word, even though it was spoken to them by Paul. So the Bible is the word of certain men, to be sure. But because God is working through those men as they speak and write, the Bible is really “the word of God,” as Paul says.

But how can the Bible be from men but really from God? How can we be sure that humans who spoke and wrote actually have spoken and written what God wanted them to express, so we can be sure that the Bible really and truly is God's Word? Our answer comes from a very helpful statement by the apostle Peter. In 2 Peter 1:20–21 Peter writes,

God Talks

“no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Here is our answer. The Holy Spirit of God, who lives in the lives of all of those who trust in Christ, did a special work in producing the Bible. As Peter says here, the authors of Scripture, who spoke forth the prophesies of the Bible and all of its teachings, were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” as they wrote. So, what they wrote was not as much from them as it was from the Holy Spirit who moved them to write what they did. In this way the Bible is from human authors but even more from God. God, by his Spirit, worked in these writers so that these “men spoke from God” as they wrote the books that we now have in our Bibles. This doesn’t take away from the fact that Moses and Isaiah and Paul and Peter and many others wrote different books of the Bible. But it means that with these books, unlike any other books, God worked by his Spirit to make sure that what they wrote would be exactly what he wanted.

Go back again for a minute to something else that was said in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. Not only does Paul say that all of the Bible is “breathed out by God” and so is God’s Word, he also says that the Bible is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” His point is this: because the Bible is from God, it is also very helpful and useful in causing us to grow as we should. Or think of it like this: because the Bible *is what it is* (it is the Word of God), *it can do what it does* (it is profitable to help us grow and be equipped for every good work). But if the Bible were not really the Word of God, we could not be sure that it would work in these positive ways to help us to grow. What the Bible is (the Word of God) enables it to do what it does (help us to grow).

God is a talking God, and how thankful we should be that he “talked” into the very pages of the Bible all of the teachings that he wanted his people to know. How foolish we are when we forget to read and study this book. But how wise and blessed we are when we go to this book constantly for instruction, guidance, correction, and help with living life as God wants. We should thank God every day that the Bible is his Word, that the Bible has the power to help us grow. And we should commit ourselves to knowing the Bible better all the time, so we can learn all that God has for us and live in ways that honor him and bring blessing to our own lives.

God Is God Apart from Us

Questions for Thought

1. How important is it to believe that the Bible is fully God's Word while it also is the writings of different human authors? That is, why does it matter that the Bible is from God but was also written by men?
2. Since the Bible really is God's Word, that is, since God really talks to us through what is written in the Bible, what should our attitude be to listening to the Bible when it is read? When reading the Bible for ourselves? When hearing the Bible taught and preached?

Memory Verses

2 Timothy 3:16–17—“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”



God Is God Apart from Us

God is so amazingly great, so perfectly strong, and so completely different from everyone and everything else that he is able to live fully as God without any help from anyone or anything. God doesn't need air to breathe or food to eat or water to drink. He doesn't need help with the work that he decides to do. Rather, God always has, within his own life, everything he needs for being who he is as God and for doing all that he chooses to do. He doesn't need anything at all in the whole world, even though everything in the world needs God. So, God is God—completely and perfectly—without anything in the world helping God to be God.

It is hard to think of God this way, but it is important to learn that this is who God really is. Everything else, and everyone else, in all of the world has to depend on certain things or on certain people. If we listed all of the things we need—things that we don't have in our own lives

God Is God Apart from Us

but must receive in order to live and to do what we want to do—we would be amazed at how long the list would be. But God has no such list! Nothing in the entire world can add to God or can give to God something that he lacks. He has everything—yes, everything!—that really is good, and he has all of this within his own life as God. There is not one single good quality that is not contained within God’s own life as God. Anything you can think of that really is good—all truth, all wisdom, all power, all kindness, all love, all righteousness, and every other good thing—is in the very life of God, and it always has been this way. It is simply impossible for God to lack any good thing, because by his very life and being he is the one who has everything that truly and really is good. So, God is God, fully and completely, apart from us and apart from the world that he has made.

When the apostle Paul was asked to tell some people about who God really is, he talked about this very thing. In Acts 17:24–25 Paul said, “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” The reason that God cannot be given anything is clear—God already has it all! For this very reason, God is the one who gives to all of creation what it needs, while nothing in all of creation can give to God anything that he supposedly lacks. Another verse that helps us see this is James 1:17: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” If everything that is good and perfect is from God (“the Father of lights”), then this means that God is the one who possesses everything that is good in the first place. You can’t give to another what you don’t first have. So, for God to give every good and perfect gift that ever is given to each and every person, he must be the one who already has all of those good things. Yes, God is God apart from us, in that he possesses within his own life the fullness of all that is good and perfect.

The prophet Isaiah also helps us see just how great God is by using some examples or illustrations that show us how big and full and wise he is, compared to us. In Isaiah 40:12, the prophet asks some questions meant to help us see God’s greatness: “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?” Think of that very first image from the verse—who

God Is God Apart from Us

do you know who can hold the waters of the world in the palm of his hand? Imagine for a moment a hand so big that it can cup the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and all of the seas of the world in the hollow of this huge hand. What a big hand this would be!

Once when our two girls were very young, our family was on vacation along the Oregon coast. At breakfast, I read this passage from Isaiah 40 to my wife and daughters and then asked my two girls if they wanted to do an experiment down at the beach. Bethany was about seven, and Rachel was about three, and they both agreed to come along, excited to see what it was. When we got to the beach, I asked them to stay along the shoreline as I waded out into the Pacific Ocean just a bit. I asked them to watch the ocean carefully, because I was going to stoop down and scoop up water from the ocean, and I wanted them to watch to see how much the level of the ocean dipped as I scooped up water from it. They agreed, and I proceeded to scoop up water with my hands. “Did it change?” I asked them eagerly. A bit disappointed, they said, “No, Daddy, it didn’t.” I asked them to look very carefully again as I once more leaned over and scooped up a handful of water. “Did it change?” I asked again. “No, Daddy,” they again replied.

I walked up onto the shore, knelt down before my girls, and said to them, “Girls, I want you to learn something very important about the difference between how big we are and how big God is. You see, when I went out into this ocean and scooped up all of the water I could within the hollow of my two hands, you couldn’t tell that anything had changed at all. But look again at the size of this vast ocean. Imagine a hand so big that if this hand came down right now and scooped up all of the water it could hold, this ocean bed would be dry. That’s how big God is!”

Other images in Isaiah 40:12 indicate that his hand is so big that it is able to measure the full extent of the heavens, and his arm is so strong that he could hold the scales on which the mountain ranges of this world are weighed. Indeed, God is great—so great that nothing could add to his greatness. And the greatness of God—the fact that he possesses within himself everything that is good and wise and perfect—indicates to us just how much we should honor him as God and depend on him for all that we need. We should be humble before this great and mighty God, realizing that while we can give nothing to him that he doesn’t already have, he has everything that we need. Our hearts should long to praise this God and to live in dependence upon him. Yes, indeed, God deserves nothing less.

God Is God with Us

Questions for Thought

1. We saw that God always has within his own life everything that really is good. How does this show why God alone ought to be loved and respected and honored above everything and everyone else?
2. What are some things you need that if you didn't have them you wouldn't be able to live? Why should you thank God for giving you those things?

Memory Verses

Acts 17:24–25—“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.”



God Is God with Us

Amazingly, even though God is fully God apart from us and apart from the whole creation that he has made, the Bible also teaches that God is a God who is with us. That is, he not only is a God far-off, vast and mighty, big and full of all good things, but he also is a God who has chosen to come near to us, to live with us, to make himself known to us, and to provide for us all that we truly need. Sometimes we might think to ourselves, “Well, of course God wants to be with us; after all, we are such wonderful people.” But to think this way is to miss how amazing and truly wonderful it is that God is a God who is with us.

Two things need to be clear in our thinking. First, we must realize that God didn't need to create this world or to create us. Remember that God possesses within his own life everything that is good and wise and perfect. He didn't need the creation that he made, and he didn't have to create us. Some have thought that God made us because he was lonely, but this just is not true. As Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (we'll talk about this more in the next section), he delights in the fellowship he has as three persons in

God Is God with Us

one. And since God already possesses everything that is good within his own life, creation could never add anything to God that he lacked. So, we are not here to fill some supposed emptiness in God or because God needs us somehow to help him out. Second, we must remember that after God created us, we turned against him, rejecting his goodness and wanting to live our lives our own way (we'll talk more about this later also). Because we have sinned against God, we deserve to be rejected by God, not accepted by him.

So, it really is amazing and wonderful that even though God doesn't need us, and even though we have turned away from God in our sin, God comes to us, makes himself known to us, and desires to give himself fully to us. While God is fully God apart from us, amazingly, God is also a God who has chosen to be with us.

Isaiah 57:15 gives us a beautiful description of God in both of these ways: "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" Can you see both of these truths about God in this verse? First, God is "high and lifted up," and he lives "in the high and holy place." As such, God is God apart from us. In himself, he lives fully as God apart from this world that he has made. But even though God is so great and full in his own life, he has chosen also to come and "dwell" with those who are "contrite and lowly." Why has he chosen to do this? Has he come because he needs something from us? No, rather God sees that we need something—everything!—from him. God chooses to come to those who are humble before him, "to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite." In other words, God comes to us not so we can fill up some emptiness in God (there is none), but so he can fill up the huge emptiness in us. Even though God doesn't need us, he loves us, and he wants us to receive from him all of the goodness, blessing, and joy that he has for those who will be humble and dependent before him.

One thing this makes clear is how different God's love for us is from our love for each other. A husband may truly love his wife, and the wife may truly love her husband, and yet in their love for each other, they both have needs that the other person must meet. Their love for each other, then, is a matter of both giving to serve the other and receiving what one needs from the other. But since God has no needs that he himself does not meet within his own life as God, his love for us is completely unselfish.

God Is God with Us

God's love, as C. S. Lewis put it, is "bottomlessly selfless, by very definition; it has everything to give and nothing to receive" (*The Problem of Pain*). God's love for us is not a *because of* love; God doesn't love us for what he can get from us, as if he needed anything we could give him! Rather, God's love is an *in spite of* love; God loves us even though we cannot benefit him, and even though we have sinned against him. As Paul puts it, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8), and John says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

This last point raises a very important truth that we will look at much more in later chapters. For God to be a God who is with us, he must come to us in our sin. And yet God is pure, holy, and sinless, and so he cannot live joyfully and fully with us as sinners. So, God chose that he would come to be with us in the person of his own Son, who would live a perfect life in all of the ways that we as sinners had failed to do. As one who was perfect and sinless, God's Son, Jesus, could then pay the penalty we deserved to pay for our sin. When Jesus died on the cross, his Father placed upon Jesus our sin, so that Jesus died in our place, paying the penalty of death that we deserved to pay. Only in this way would it be possible for our sin to be taken away or forgiven, so we could be viewed by God no longer as sinful but now as pure and righteous. As Paul states it, "For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

What God calls us to do is to admit that we have sinned against him, that we deserve death for our sin, and now to believe and trust that Jesus died in our place, paying the penalty we deserved for our sin. When we turn from our sin and trust in Jesus' death as a full payment for our sin, God promises to forgive us of our sin and to make us clean before him. Paul states, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Although we deserve to die because of our sin, God's gift to us through faith is life with him that never ends. How amazing that even though God is holy and sinless, he has come near to us, especially in his own Son, providing a way for us to be saved from our sin and brought into his presence forever. God truly is a God who is with us—with us forever through faith in Christ.

Some Truths about God's Richness

Questions for Thought

1. Why do we sometimes think that God loves us because we deserve to be loved by him? What are some reasons we should realize that we do not deserve to have God's love or kindness shown to us?
2. If God loves us when he doesn't need us and when we don't deserve his love, how should we respond to his great love?

Memory Verse

Romans 5:8—"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."



Some Truths about God's Richness That Make Him God

How important is it to know someone well, and to know his or her character? Imagine, for example, asking a perfect stranger to stay in your house and watch your pets while you're on vacation. Would you trust him? Isn't it true that only in coming to know someone are you able to decide whether he can be trusted, whether she is true to her word, whether you can depend on him or her? The very same thing is true in our relationship with God. We need to seek to know him much, much better so that we will be drawn to love and trust him more. Knowing him better should be one of the main things we seek through all of our lives. Here we'll consider three ways in which the character of God is seen in God who lives fully as God, apart from the world. There is a richness to God that is true of him totally apart from whether he made the world or not. God is God *period*. As we've seen, God does not need the world in order to be God, even though the world needs God for everything that it is and does. So, what are some of the ways that God's richness can be seen as he is—the true and living God, apart from the world?

Some Truths about God's Richness

First, God is *eternal*. This means that God's life has no beginning, and it has no ending. Unlike everything else that has ever existed, God does not depend on anything else for his life, since he always lives and can never die. This is a very difficult idea for us to understand, since we do not know of anything like this—and that's because there is nothing in all of creation that is like God. Your own life had a beginning, when you were first conceived, and then nine months later you were born into this world. And your mom and dad both began at some time, as has every dog, cat, lion, elephant, tree, and insect. Everything else has a beginning to its life. But this is not true of God. God has no beginning, since he always lives. And because life is part of what it means for God to be God, his life can never come to an end. A psalm written by Moses offers this way of seeing God as always living, as eternal: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psalm 90:1–2). When Moses speaks of God as living "from everlasting to everlasting," he means that as far back as you can think (even before God created the universe and created time itself) to as far forward as you can think (imagine heaven that continues millions and billions of years from now), God has always lived and will always live. From the everlasting past to the everlasting future, God has always existed as God and always will. So, the true and living God has life in himself. No one has given him life, and no one can take away that life. Because God is God, he always lives.

Because God has life in himself, this also means that God has everything that he needs for his life in himself. After all, since God lives forever, it must be true that God has lived most of his life when there was nothing else. God lived before he created the world, and he was still fully God then. So, for God to have life in himself, it means that he also must have everything that he needs for his own life within himself. We can think of God, then, as being both self-existent (he has life in himself) and self-sufficient (he has everything he needs for his life in himself). This reminds us of what we spoke of earlier, that God has no need for the world, since everything God needs to be God is found in his own life. Because God is eternal, because he has life in himself, it also means that he has every good thing within his own life. Nothing can be added to the richness that God has because God has it all, without beginning and without ending.

Second, God is *holy*. The Bible often speaks of the holiness of God, and it emphasizes this truth about God as of the highest importance.

Some Truths about God's Richness

For example, Isaiah once had a vision of God sitting upon his throne in his temple. Mighty angels flew around him, and they cried out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3). To be holy means to be different from all else—to be unique or separate or set apart. These angels are proclaiming that God is different from all else; there is no one like him. The Song of Moses says the same thing: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11). And, of course, the answer to this question is, "No one is like the Lord," and so, God truly is holy. He is one-of-a-kind, unique.

One of the most important things about God's holiness is that he is completely separate from all that is wrong or impure or sinful. He has a life that cannot be stained by anything that is bad. Because God is truth, he cannot tell a lie or believe a lie. Because God is faithful, he cannot go back on his word or break a promise. Because God is righteous, he cannot do what is evil or consider the evil that others do as okay or acceptable. Another way to think of God's holiness is this: because God is holy he cannot be less than who he is as God, and he cannot be other than who he is as God. God is wise and good and righteous and truthful and faithful, and God simply cannot be different than this. He is holy, and so he is separated from anything that is contrary to his own life as God.

Third, God is *unchangeable*. We should be able to understand this from what we've just seen of God's holiness. God is God, and this means that God cannot be less than who he is as God, just as God cannot be other than who he is as God. God has every quality within his own life as God, and because of this, he simply cannot change for the better or for the worse. A beautiful statement of this truth is expressed in Psalm 102:25–27: "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end." Yes, indeed, God is the same, and his years never come to an end. God is who he ever is, and nothing in the very character of God can change.

Considering that God is eternal and holy and unchangeable should bring to us both praise for God's greatness and trust because of the faithfulness of his character. Knowing God is this way, we truly can count on him. He always lives, and he always has all power and wisdom and goodness that he alone has as a holy God. He can never change in his character, becoming less or other than he is. We know that we can believe his word

Some Truths about God's Kindness

and trust his wisdom and power to do what is right. Knowing the richness of God, then, leads us to honor him, worship him, trust him, and humble ourselves before him. God alone is God, and God's richness is without measure and without end.

Questions for Thought

1. God is so different from us. What are some of the ways God is not like anything he has made? How does this show God's greatness?
2. God never changes in being the perfect God that he is. How does this truth about God bring comfort, strength, and hope to those who trust in God for what they face in their lives?

Memory Verse

Exodus 15:11—"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"



Some Truths about God's Kindness That Make Him God

In learning who God really is, we find that he not only is separate from us in his richness and fullness as the eternal God, but he is also with us as a patient, gracious, forgiving, and loving God. So, not only is God rich in his life as God, he also is gracious and kind in his relationship with his people. Here we look together at three truths about God that show the greatness of his kindness, truths that help us know God better and realize even more why our hope and trust and dependence should be placed in God.

First, God is *wise*. In fact, the Bible teaches that God's wisdom is so vast and perfect that it is right to call him "the only wise God" (Romans 16:27). Even though people may have some bits of wisdom—some more than others, and all of it from God!—only God is perfectly wise.

Some Truths about God's Kindness

To understand what it means for God to be wise, we should talk for a minute about the difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge has to do with having certain facts or information stored up in one's brain. A person can know the multiplication table or the order of the presidents of the United States or the names of the planets of our solar system. Knowledge is factual, and one can acquire much knowledge, but not necessarily be wise. What's the difference? Wisdom depends on knowledge, but it goes beyond knowledge. Wisdom takes factual knowledge and puts it to use to figure out how best to solve a problem or how to plan for something that might happen in the future. Wisdom, then, is knowledge applied; it is knowledge put to use for some practical purpose. But there's more. To see this, stop and ask yourself, what is the difference between someone who is wise and someone who is cunning or crafty? A cunning or crafty person probably uses knowledge to accomplish something, but he does this for bad purposes. A thief may be very cunning, but his use of knowledge of how to steal something should not be considered wise, right? So wisdom, then, is a use of knowledge, but it is a use of knowledge to bring about something that is good and right and helpful.

Now ask yourself two questions about God. 1) How much knowledge does God have? Answer: God knows everything that can be known. He knows everything about the past, the present, and the future. He knows things exactly as they are, and he is never wrong about anything. 2) What guides God's use of this perfect knowledge as he makes his plans and carries out his will? Answer: God's own holy and righteous nature guides him. This means that everything he decides, and every use of his knowledge, will bring about what is completely good and right and best.

No wonder the Bible talks about God's wisdom being shown through his creation of the world (Psalm 104:24) and in his salvation of sinners (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). In these two greatest works of God we see how God took his vast knowledge and applied it to bring about what was good and right and beautiful and best. Both creation and the cross of Christ display the wisdom of God like nothing else ever has or ever could.

Second, God is *all-powerful*. Think with me for a minute: what if God were wise, in the ways we've just seen, but suppose he didn't have the power to bring about what his wisdom had planned? What would we think about God then? Well, we might respect God for having such vast knowledge and perfect wisdom, but we would also feel sorry for someone who knew the best things to do but who couldn't do them. But what if God had all power and yet suppose that he wasn't actually wise? What

Some Truths about God's Kindness

would we think then? It doesn't take long to realize that if this were true, we would be terrified of God and of what he might do. After all, to have all power but to lack wisdom that directs its use is a very scary idea. But here is the truth—the true God, the God of the Bible, is both perfectly wise and almighty in his power! He is able to plan what is best, and nothing can keep God from bringing about what he knows is best to do.

Abraham and Sarah learned about God's great power. They were both very old, and they had not yet had the son that God had promised they would have. As the years went by and Sarah got older and older, she began to doubt that God could make it possible for her to have this baby boy. When God told Abraham that he would work in Sarah's body so that she would give birth to a son named Isaac, Sarah laughed. God heard this, and he responded, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son" (Genesis 18:13–14). Interestingly, the name *Isaac* that God said to name this son means, "he laughs." So, even though Sarah laughed, thinking she was too old for God to fulfill this promise, God instructed that her son be named "Isaac," "he laughs." God's power was so great that God got the last laugh. God's power is without limit. As the prophet Jeremiah states, "Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who has made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you" (Jeremiah 32:17). Nothing? No, nothing!

Third, God is *all-good*. How encouraging to know that yes, God is *all-good*. Even though we are very glad that God is completely good, this is another truth about God that is sometimes hard to believe. After all, we do not know anyone who is completely and perfectly good. Because we are sinners, and all the people we know are sinners—even really fine Christian people still sin and do what is wrong sometimes—we find it hard to believe that God is purely and perfectly good. But good he is! Psalm 5:4 declares of God, "For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you." God has no wickedness or evil in him at all. Rather, as Psalm 119:68 says of God, "You are good and do good." God's very life is good, and all of his actions are good. There is no evil in God at all, and all that God is and all that God does is completely good.

Part of what it means for God to be good is that he longs for his own people to be blessed and to experience true and lasting joy. He loves his own people deeply, and the proof of his love for his own people is seen in the grace and mercy shown to them despite their sin. Even though we

Some Truths about God's Kindness

deserve God's just punishment, God has sent his Son to pay for our sin and bring us into right relationship with himself. Such grace (kindness given to those who deserve punishment instead; see Ephesians 2:8–9) and mercy (kindness given to those who are hopeless and helpless; see Ephesians 2:1–4) are the expressions of God's love and goodness to his own people.

So, God is perfectly wise, all-powerful, and completely good. We have every reason to trust him, then. God plans only what is best (he is perfectly wise), and God cannot be hindered in bringing it about (he is all-powerful), and we know that his plans will work out for our best (he is completely good). Like sitting on a three-legged stool, we need to sit by faith on top of these three supports: God's wisdom, power, and goodness give us every reason to put our trust in God, and in God alone.

Questions for Thought

1. Why is it good (and wonderful) that God is both all-powerful and all-wise? How does our trust in God depend on God being both all-wise and all-powerful?
2. How is your confidence in God and his ways strengthened even more by knowing that God is always good? What are some ways your doubts or fears can be removed by trusting in God's wisdom, power, and goodness?

Memory Verse

Daniel 2:20—"Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might."

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BRUCE A. WARE (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary), president of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2009, is professor of Christian theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has written numerous journal articles, book chapters and book reviews, and has authored *God's Lesser Glory*, *God's Greater Glory*, and *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

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