

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 19, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Dr. Arthur Compton, Nobel Prize Winner in Physics, once called the opening statement of the Bible “the most majestic statement ever uttered.” Truly it is, for the Bible begins with the sentence, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Just when “in the beginning” was no one knows, but it is comforting to believe that whenever it was God was already there.

Adam Clarke, the noted commentator, once gave this definition of God: “The eternal, independent, and self-existent Being: the Being whose purposes and actions spring from himself, without foreign motive or influence: he who is absolute in dominion; the most pure, the most simple, and most spiritual of all essences; infinitely benevolent, beneficent, true, and holy: the Cause of all being, the upholder of all things; infinitely happy, because infinitely perfect; and eternally self-sufficient, needing nothing that he has made: illimitable in his immensity, inconceivable in his mode of existence, and indescribable in his essence; known fully only to himself, because an infinite mind can be fully apprehended only by itself. In a word, a Being who, from his infinite wisdom cannot err or be deceived; and who from his infinite goodness, can do nothing but what is eternally just, right, and kind ... Such is the God of the Bible.” (*Clarke’s Commentary*, Vol. I, p. 27).

The Biblical view is that God is an eternal being who is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), holy, just, merciful, loving, not only the First Cause, but the being who maintains and supervises the universe. This is the Biblical doctrine of God revealed by bringing together all the passages that reveal God in the Bible. While it is not possible for mortal man to comprehend God fully, it is possible through the reading of the Word to make a beginning. The Bible is a book from God, and a book pre-eminently about God and God’s will for man.

The Existence of God

In some quarters the very existence of God has been questioned. Sigmund Freud, for example, in his book, *The Future of An Illusion*, argues that God is the creation of man, rather than man the creation of God. He believes that the idea of God is merely the projection of man’s wish, mere auto-suggestion. Because man feels weak, dependent, afraid and alone, he imagines a protective father into existence.

Actually, this is just the reverse of what is true. Instead of man wanting to create a non-existent god, man actually wants to run away from the God who really is. Man would like to eliminate God and thereby eliminate God’s claims upon him—claims of morality, claims of ethical behavior, claims which cost him time, money, and effort. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God, Jonah tried to run away from God. Modern twentieth-century man tried to ignore God, in his feelings of independence, self-sufficiency, and pride.

A portion of the 139th Psalm is a description of man and his inability to escape from the God who exists, “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.” (Ps. 139:7-10).

Thomas Aquinas, toward the end of the Middle Ages, pictured God as revealing himself to man in a two-fold manner, which he likened to a two story house. The bottom floor is nature, which testifies to the existence of a creator God behind it. One can hardly study the world about him—the microscopic world, the telescopic world, and all in between—without finding overpowering evidence that a divine creative mind conceived the universe and then brought it into being. The second floor of God’s revelation of himself is that found in the written word, our Bible. It is to this source that we now turn, because as magnificent as is nature in revealing the existence of God, it is only the Bible which tells us who God is and describes him so that we may properly appreciate him.

God, the Creator

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness ... And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters ... And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear ... And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night: and let them be for signs, for seasons, and for days and years ... And God said, Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven ... And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind, cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth after their kind ... And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the bird’s of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the

earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” (Gen. 1:1-4, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24, 26-27).

### The Covenant God

At the end of the Patriarchal period God gave man the world’s first written code of laws. “And God spake all these words, saying, I am Jehovah thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” (Ex. 20:1-3). Just here I would like to interrupt the reading to say that while for generations theologians have thought that man’s earliest conceptions of divinity were polytheistic, the trend of thinking is now that man’s earliest conceptions of God were monotheistic. The authority for this reversal in thinking is no less than Dr. William L. Albright, of Johns Hopkins University, dean of American archeologists. This is encouraging because it is exactly parallel to the scriptures which present Jehovah as unique--the only true and living God.

“Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them nor serve them; for I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of them that hate me, and showing lovingkindness unto the thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.” (Ex. 20:4-6).

In Exodus 19:5 we find the clear-cut statement that God is a covenant God, as follows: “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be mine own possession from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” In all dispensations God has given man directions on how he must live, If man keeps covenant God, he is blessed; if not, he suffers the consequences.

### The Greatness of God

Toward the end of the book of Job we find this sharp contrast between the power of God and that of man. “Then Jehovah answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me, Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who determined the measure thereof, of thou knowest? Or who stretched the line upon it? Whereupon were the foundations thereof fastened? Who laid the cornerstone thereof, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? ... Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days began, and caused the day spring to know its place? ... Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the recesses of the deep? ... Where is the way to the dwelling place of light? and as for darkness, where is the place thereof? ... Hast thou entered the treasuries of the snow, or hast thou seen the treasuries of the hail? ... Canst thou bind the cluster of the Pleiades, or loose the hands of Orion? Canst thou lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season? or canst thou guide the Bear with her train. Knowest thou the ordinances of the heavens? Canst thou establish the dominion thereof in the earth?” A little later, in view of these inabilities of man, Job replied, “I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be restrained ... I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee, wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job. 38:1-7, 12,16, 19, 22, 31-33; 42:2, 5-6).

### The Psalms

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard.” (Ps. 19:1-3). This passage is one of those that indicates that the realm of nature about us is testimony to the existence and power of God. Later in that same psalm the writer pays tribute to the “law of Jehovah,” the “testimony of Jehovah,” “the precepts of Jehovah,” and the “ordinances of Jehovah,” as further evidence of the greatness of God.

Moses, who is credited with being the author of the ninetieth Psalm has written, “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God ... For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.” (Ps. 90:1-2, 4).

Both the omnipresence and omniscience of God are revealed in the following, “O Jehovah, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising: thou understandest my thoughts afar off. Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Jehovah, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thy hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it.” (Ps. 139:1-6).

Although not one of the Psalms, Isaiah 55:8-9, continues this idea of God’s superiority: “For my thoughts are not as your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith Jehovah. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

## Fatherhood of God

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus spoke of God as our Father. In teaching the necessity to love one's enemies, he said, "that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." In the following chapter he used the same expression in commanding the giving of alms secretly, saying, "thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee." A few verses later he added, "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." (Matt. 5:45; 6:4-9).

The central theme of Paul's great speech on Mars Hill in Athens is also the Fatherhood of God. He said, Ye men of Athens, in all things I perceive that ye are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, To an Unknown God. What therefore ye worship in ignorance, this I set forth unto you. The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is he served by men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things: and he made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us: for in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man." (Acts 17:22-29).

## The Severity of God

In Romans 11:22 we read, "Behold then the goodness and severity of God: toward them that fell, severity; but toward thee, God's goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off." A chapter later in Romans 12:19 we find, "Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord." To these passages we should add Hebrews 10:30-31, "For we know him that said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense. And again, the Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

In understanding these passages, however, we need to read II Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promises, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." God's great love and mercy have been manifest in giving man an opportunity to escape the just desserts of his sin; if man turns down the invitation, man must bear his own responsibility for the loss of his soul.

## The Love of God

We come, finally, to I John 4:7-8, where we read of the supreme essence of God. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is begotten of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." We have noticed a number of descriptive qualities in connection with our understanding of God. God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and much more. However, nowhere do we find a more substantive statement such as "God is love." The very central essence of God's being is that he is love. This can be said of no other quality of God.

The love of God has been manifest for man in so many ways. It was manifest when he created the world for the good of mankind. It was later manifest when "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16). Romans 5:8, puts it, "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." In Acts 10:34-35, Peter is quoted as saying, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him." Perhaps we ought here to remember Jesus' summary statement, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning." (James 1:17).

## Summary

To complete this brief picture of the Biblical doctrine of God, let us notice his majesty as suggested in Rev. 4:8-11, where after speaking of the four living creatures John further reveals his vision as follows, "And the four living creatures, having each one of them six wings, are full of eyes round about and within: and they have no rest day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come. And when the living creatures shall give glory and honor and thanks to him that sitteth on the throne, to him that liveth forever and ever, the four and twenty elders shall fall down before him that sitteth upon the throne, and shall worship him that liveth forever and ever, and shall cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created."

It is not enough to know of God, or even to believe in God. It is enough only when we obey God. May each of us believe in him and then make that belief meaningful by confessing faith in Jesus Christ as his Son, repenting of our past sins, and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Then, may we live a lifetime of service to our fellowman and to God. May we offer up the fruit of our lips and the devotion of our hearts, in acceptable worship to him. May our lives be a glorification of God.