

L LORD

OF HEAVEN & EARTH:

*LESSONS ON THE NATURE AND CHARACTER
OF THE GOD OF SCRIPTURE*

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LORD OF HEAVEN & EARTH: Lesson Notes

****Class participants can prepare for each session by reading through the lesson notes and being prepared to discuss the Thought Questions in class****

LESSONS

1. TOTHEPRAISEOFHISGLORY

A lesson on Christian theology as a basis for praise to God

2. ETERNAL POWER & DIVINE NATURE

A lesson on the results and limitations of recognizing God in nature

3. MAKER OF HEAVEN & EARTH

A lesson on the identity of God revealed in the act of creation

4. HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

A lesson on the transcendent nature of God

5. THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

A lesson on the immanent character of God

6. HOW LONG, O LORD?

A lesson on God and the problem of evil

7. THE GOD OF ISRAEL

A lesson on the story of Yahweh, Israel, and the blessing of the world

8. GOD WITH US

A lesson on the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth

9. FATHER, SON & SPIRIT

A lesson on the Trinity revealed in salvation

10. ALPHA & OMEGA

A lesson on the God who makes all things new

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LESSON 1: TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY – Christian theology as a basis for praise to God

❖ Defining & Defending Theology

- THEOLOGY is inherent to the life of every Christian.
- Good Theology results in PRAISE of the Living and True God.
- Bad Theology results in IDOLATRY.

❖ Approach

- God can be known by means of his 'self-revelation.'
- There are four identifiable sources of theological knowledge. All of these bring something to bear on what we know about God.
 - SCRIPTURE – the controlling source of all knowledge of God, as the inspired revelation from God himself in 66 books of the Old and New Testaments
 - TRADITION – the activity of the church to reflect upon Scripture to foster spiritual growth and maturity
 - RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE – an accumulated knowledge about God based arising through first-hand encounter with life
 - REASON – human mental capacity to process life experience
- Authority of Scripture
 - Scripture reveals God's reality and activity, not human projections.
 - The Unity of Scripture is constituted by its overarching narrative of the creation and redemption of God's world.
 - Scripture is the truthful and inspired Word of God.
- God is known by his attributes, actions, and aims & purposes. The lessons in this class will attempt to know God by his activity in the world as revealed in Scripture.

❖ Final Considerations

- 'Theology Proper' studies God as God; other aspects of theology fall within this.
- Similarities and Differences between Theology and 'Doctrine'
 - Example: 1 Cor. 15:3-5 is the fact of what is taught (Doctrine); 1 Cor. 15:20-22 is the theological assertion which gives weight to the teaching
- Theology as using accommodative language
 - Example: God as 'Father' is an appropriate metaphor for God because of all the positive qualities of fatherhood that God retains. However, some attributes of human fatherhood do not apply to God (e.g. 'gender' or 'domination')

❖ Themes & Goals

- The major theme of the class is the biblical motif of the Heavens and the Earth as a figure for the fellowship between God and humanity. Goals of the class should help draw this theme out:
- Introduce basic concepts for understanding who God is (and who he is not!)
- Recognize both the transcendent nature, and relational character of God
- Understand the aims and purposes of God for his Creation
- Renew our devotion to God as Trinity
- Give purpose to our vocation as the bearers of God's image to the world

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❖ In Praise of God

- Ephesians 1:3-14

❖ Thought Questions

- One classic definition of theology is 'Faith seeking understanding.' Why is it important that people of faith seek to understand that faith?
- How would you summarize the term 'revelation?'
- What might we learn differently (or additionally) about God from understanding his purposes for, and actions in, the world than we might learn by understanding his divine attributes?

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LESSON 2: ETERNAL POWER & DIVINE NATURE – Results and limitations of knowing God in nature

- ❖ General Revelation v. Special Revelation
 - GENERAL REVELATION – God’s means of revealing himself through the traits and processes of creation.
 - SPECIAL REVELATION – God’s means of revealing himself directly through the actions and words of human beings (e.g. Jesus, Scripture).
- ❖ ‘Natural Theology’ seeks to know God through observation and study of the natural processes of the world (science, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, etc.).
- ❖ ‘Proofs’ for God’s existence
 - ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT > God as ‘Highest Form of Being’
 - This argument defines God ‘that than of which no greater thing can be thought.’ Reasoning from this that existence is always greater than non-existence, it is logically concluded that God must exist.
 - COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS > God as ‘First Uncaused Cause’
 - Based on the observable principles of causation and dependency, this argument deduces that God is the primary cause upon which all existence depends.
 - TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT > God as ‘Designer of the Universe’
 - Teleology suggests that all elements of the world show evidence of function and purpose – often to ‘fine-tuned’ levels – thus suggesting a God who designed it.
- ❖ Discerning God in Human Nature (individuals and cultures)
 - Sense of Higher Reality – Human beings observe and experience things that seem to go beyond our physical limitations – e.g. mental cognition and consciousness, truth, spirituality.
 - Sense of Morality – the common belief that there exists a standard for how people ought to behave toward one another and society suggests a moral establishment of some kind – e.g. justice, freedom, power.
 - Sense of Aesthetic – the experience of awe or delight in the orderliness of the world allows us to appreciate and discern the world’s designer – e.g. beauty, pleasure.
 - God known through the universe or human nature is always limited, though.
 - Philosophy and Science can only speak generically about God.
 - Evil in the world challenges what we can discern about God’s power and/or goodness.
- ❖ God in History?
 - God known through human history (Israel & Jesus!) provides a possible way forward for Natural Theology
 - History, as recorded in Scriptures, is a bridge between General Revelation and Special Revelation

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❖ In Praise of God

- Psalm 119: 1-4 / Acts 17:24-28

❖ Thought Questions

- Some might suggest that knowing God through observation of the world is an impossible task because it can only ever reveal things about ourselves rather than God. Do you think this is correct?
- Which of the three main 'proofs' of God's existence do you find most compelling? Why?
- What experiences in your own life might lead you to a belief in a divine power outside of what you know from Scripture?

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LESSON 3: MAKER OF HEAVEN & EARTH – The identity of God revealed in the act of creation

- ❖ God must be known through what scripture reveals about the activity of creation.
- ❖ Options for the Divine Being ('What kind of god is God?')
 - Other world religions and/or philosophies have multiple ways of conceiving of whether god(s) exists, how god(s) relate to other potential gods, and how god(s) relate to our world:
 - THEISM – God(s) exist(s)
 - ATHEISM – God does not exist; the natural universe is all that is
 - MONOTHEISM – belief in one, supreme God (either absolute, or superior)
 - POLYTHEISM – belief in multiple gods, with different supernatural roles/abilities
 - DUALISM – belief in equal gods which compete against each other (good v. evil)
 - PANTHEISM – belief that the universe is created out of God, so that God exists in all things and thus everything in the world is equally divine with God
 - DEISM – belief that the universe is created by God to run on its own power, so that God exists completely separated from all things, and thus has no interaction with the world
- ❖ In the Beginning
 - Genesis 1 provides its own answers to the above issues:
 - The account of creation assumes God's existence. (against Atheism)
 - The universe is not divine. It is not equal to God and does not compete with God for authority. (Against Dualism / Pantheism)
 - Creation as 'ordering the chaos'
 - Creation by The Word of God
 - The universe is in fellowship with God. (against Deism)
 - The Heavens and the Earth created for God and man to dwell together.
 - Humans are made to be God's 'image' within the creation, and to reflect God out into the world as its steward, by having dominion over it.
- ❖ The Divine Council
 - Genesis 1 & 2 record God speaking internally in the plural 'us.'
 - Biblical precedent for the Host of Heaven or Divine Council. (Job 1,2; 1 Kings 19:22f, Psalm 82, Isaiah 6, Revelation 4)
 - Made up of beings like angels, Cherubim, Seraphim
 - These other beings are always under God's authority, worshiping God (affirming monotheism)
 - Hebrew word for the Divine Council, and specifically the God who is the head of it is *ELOHIM* (a category title like 'mom' or 'boss', not a definite name)
- ❖ Implications of Creation
 - God's power and authority – the Scriptural mandate to honor and fear God alone is the appropriate response to the might and wisdom of his creative power.
 - God's sharing of his authority – the creation of humans as God's image suggests God intends to rule his creation by means of his creation. God wants to share authority rather than retaining it for himself.

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- The goodness of creation – God’s declaration of the creation as ‘good’ indicates that the Heavens and Earth were originally made as the proper place for Humans and God to dwell in fellowship.
- Meeting of Heaven and Earth – Heaven is God’s realm; Earth is humanity’s realm. God’s desire for fellowship means that these two ‘spaces’ overlap where God acts in the world to bring about his purposes.
- ❖ In Praise of God
 - Psalm 33:6-9 / Isaiah 40:28-31 / Psalm 8:1, 3-9
- ❖ Thought Questions
 - Review the list of ‘divine options’ above. What are some examples of how other world religions, or even modern secular philosophies, reflect false ideas about God?
 - Some have read Genesis 1 & 2, and conceived of God as a builder who constructs the world. Others have conceived of God as an artist who shapes and sculpts the world. Which of these do you picture God as? Any other images?
 - What does being made in God’s image mean for your life? Does it affect how you think of yourself as a person? And/or what you do?

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LESSON 4: HOLY, HOLY, HOLY – God’s Transcendent Nature

- ❖ TRANSCENDENCE – God is separate and distinct from his creation. He transcends the realities, standards and limits of the present universe.
- ❖ The Unspeakable Name
 - Exodus 3 – The Angel of the LORD appears to Moses in the burning bush, but God (Elohim) calls to him. Moses must keep his distance and remove his sandals. Also, when Moses asks God’s name, he replies “I am who I am.” – What do these mean?
 - Angel of the LORD – God is only visible through another form (e.g. an angel in fire)
 - Sandals – Moses is standing on Holy Ground
 - God’s Name – ‘I am who I am’ means ‘the self-existent one’ and/or ‘I am beyond any name’
 - God’s Name (YHWH > English equivalent LORD or Jehovah) was un-pronounced by Jewish people, even in reading it in Scripture! (based on 4th commandment)
 - These odd events and practices relate to the concept of God’s HOLINESS. Holiness affirms God’s transcendence by creating a boundary between the sacred and the profane.
- ❖ God’s Holy Attributes
 - These are attributes unique to God; he does not share these with human beings.
 - ETERNAL/INFINITE – the fundamental attribute of God’s transcendent being. All other attributes of God flow from this one. God is self-existent, not created, and always exists as God. He exists outside of space and time and so is not subject to the limitations of such dimensions. God is ‘perfect’ in that his being, capacities and abilities are limitless. (Ps. 90:2 / Jn. 4:24)
 - IMMATERIAL – God is not composed of matter or substance, and has no tangible qualities. He is pure ‘spirit,’ and is often described as being ‘invisible’ or ‘un-seeable.’ (1 Tim. 6:15-16)
 - INDEPENDENT – God is free in that he is not subject or accountable to any other beings or forces. He is the source of all things and thus can act by any means he sees fit. This further implies that God does not adhere to a separate principle of ‘goodness’ or ‘beauty’ – rather those principles exist within God’s nature itself. (Ps. 115:1-3)
 - OMNIPOTENT – God is all-powerful. He can always carry out all of his purposes without being thwarted. God’s power is expressed in his authority over the realms of heaven and earth, including control of physical properties and human minds/hearts. The biblical word often associated with God’s power is ‘Almighty.’ There are some caveats to God’s power – he cannot do anything that is illogical (e.g. make a squared circle) or act against his own nature (e.g. lie, break promises, etc.). (Is. 46:9-10 / Gen. 17:1)
 - OMNIPRESENCE – God is present everywhere in heaven and on earth. To be clear God does not exist within all things, but better said, all things exist in God’s presence. Because God has access to all things, nothing escapes his notice. (Ps. 139:7-12 / Jer. 23:34 / Heb. 4:13)

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- OMNISCIENCE – Because God is present everywhere, he also knows everything. He not only knows all past, present and future, but he also knows all actual things and even potential things that have not or will not happen. Thus, God has insight into all realities, including the thoughts and intentions of humans. (Rom. 11:33 / Ps. 139:1-6)
- OMNISAPIENCE - Because God knows all actual and potential realities, he is always able to determine the best course of action to accomplish his purposes. Thus, he is all-wise. He will always produce the right and best outcome. (Is. 55:8-11 / Rom. 16:27)
- IMMUTABLE – God is not a changing entity. He is always and constantly God. His infinite power, knowledge and presence never decrease, but nor do they increase for that would imply that God had not previously had the fulness of divine nature. His purposes and character are never modified. (Mal. 3:5 / 1 Sam 15:29)
- IMPASSIBLE – This means that God is affected by ‘passions’ or ‘emotions.’ Not that God is apathetic, but that he is not controlled by involuntary emotional reactions. This sometimes is expressed in the idea that God cannot suffer.
- Because these attributes describe God’s utter transcendent holiness, our heads often spin trying to contemplate these ideas, and how they could be absolute. That is precisely the point of believing in a transcendent God.
- ❖ Biblical images of Transcendence
 - Glorious – refers to the ‘heaviness’ or ‘weight’ of God’s being and reputation. Glory is often associated with loud sounds/voices and brightness and/or shining. It is a sensory representation of the stunning quality of God’s holiness, and often evokes a response of fear or powerlessness on the part of humans. (Ez. 1)
 - King – God is pictured as the king sitting upon a throne in the heavenly realm. Indeed, God is not just a king, but the King of all Kings, with ultimate power and authority over earthly rulers (Is. 66:1 / 1 Tim 6:15)
 - High/Exalted – Scripture frequently uses language that God is spatially elevated above humans and the earth, ruling it from above. (Ps. 113: 4-6 / Is. 40:22)
 - Rock – Especially in the Psalms, the image of God as the strong, fixed place of protection and safety gives assurances of salvation to those who serve him. (Ps. 18:1-3)
- ❖ In Praise of God
 - Revelation 4:8-11
- ❖ Thought Questions
 - How would you describe God’s transcendence to a person who asked you what that idea meant?
 - Review some of the divine attributes discussed in this lesson. How many of them make complete sense? Which are the most difficult to comprehend? Are there any problems or questions you could see arising from these attributes?
 - A common definition of ‘omnipotence’ is to say “God can do anything.” Do you agree or disagree with this claim?

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LESSON 5: THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD – God’s Immanent Character

- ❖ IMMANENCE – God is near to and intimately involved in his creation. He is able to act within and through the world.
- ❖ The Tent of Meeting
 - After receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai, in Exodus 24-5, the LORD gives Moses a new instruction – to build a sanctuary so that he can dwell among the people. Once complete, God’s glory in the fire-cloud descends and fills the Tabernacle.
 - God takes up residence among Israel in the Tabernacle, symbolized in two ways:
 - The Tabernacle (and later Temple built by Solomon) contained no image of Yahweh. Rather, God’s glory and presence dwelt therein above the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies.
 - The Tabernacle was positioned to sit at the center of the camp, surrounded by the people of the various tribes.
 - The entire idea of a Tabernacle or temple for God to reside is an example of God’s RELATIONALITY – that is, he desires relationship with his creation. He expands the borders of the sacred in order to work within the profane.
- ❖ God’s Relational Attributes
 - These are not ‘personality traits’ or ‘moods’ of God which may fluctuate. Also, these are not abstract concepts that God conforms to – rather, God is the source of all these things so they all are just perspectives on his overall divine being.
 - PERSONAL – the basis for his relationality. God is not a concept we can grasp or an object we can control. We speak to God as ‘You/Thou,’ not ‘it.’ This suggests that God is a person, and thus has personal relationships analogous to human personal relationships. These relationships can occur with individuals and larger social structures who take on a representative role for God into the wider world. (Is. 41:8-10 / Eph. 1:3-4 / Acts 17:24-29)
 - PURPOSEFUL – God executes plans and purposes for creation as revealed in Scripture. These are often accomplished through and for the sake of human creatures and human societies. (Is. 55:10-11 / Ps. 138:8 / Rom. 8:28 / Ps. 33:11)
 - PRESENT – God is close and active in human lives. The OT often figures God’s presence as his ‘face’ which could be taken away from human sin, or remains to answer prayer and give guidance for the faithful. (Is. 59:2 / Lam 2:8-9 / Josh. 1:5)
 - GOOD – God is good in all of his creations and accomplishments, and so goodness is the outcome of all of his thoughts and actions. That is, they aim at being pleasurable, suitable for their purpose, and morally right. The creation is good because God made it so, and God’s saving purposes are for good as well. (Ps. 34:8 / Gen. 1:31 / Rom. 8:28)
 - LOVING – To use the word ‘love’ to describe God is to encapsulate a feeling that is otherwise inexpressible. Therefore, John states that “God IS Love.” A simple description is that God is tender and compassionate, seeks good and does not take pleasure in suffering. His love is gracious in that it permits human freedom to love in return. (1 Jn. 4:8 / Hos. 11:1)
 - FAITHFUL – a product of God’s relationship with humanity by means of ‘covenant.’ Inasmuch as God enters into agreement with people, God is faithful

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to the stated terms of those covenant agreements. God's faithfulness is to the uttermost, and maintains covenant allegiance even when humans sin and break the covenant. (Deut. 7:9 / Is. 49:7)

- MERCIFUL – Mercy follows from love and faithfulness. Where the actions of humans merit a withdrawal of God's love and faithfulness, he gives them anyway – and in abundance. The Hebrew word *chesed* [*kHES-ed*] – often translated as 'lovingkindness' – combines our separate ideas of love, faithfulness and mercy into a single idea that God repays good for evil. (Ps. 89:1 / Ps. 136 / Is. 63:7-9)
- RIGHTEOUS – God holds people accountable for their choices. That he desires to make all things right in light of human choices is his 'justice' or 'righteousness.' God can accomplish justice by means of retributive punishment for sin, establishing means of atonement, or restorative action to ensure the dignity of oppressed people. God's justice ensures that humans remain in good standing with each other, and God himself. (Ps. 89:14 / Ps. 146:7-8)
- WRATHFUL – God's actions of retributive punishment are described as 'anger' or 'wrath.' God is offended by sin and the dishonor of his people, and so he punishes to maintain his distinction from evil and his honorable name in the world. (Deut. 29:22-28 / Rom. 1:18)
- JEALOUS – Because God enters into relationships in which people become God's representation upon the Earth, God is 'jealous' or 'zealous' for their reciprocal faithfulness against their devotion to any other pseudo-god. Along with his wrath, God's jealousy is an expression of his concern for his own holiness and glory. (Ex. 34:13-14 / Ez. 39:25)
- ❖ Biblical Symbols of Immanence
 - Father – The concept is first used to describe Israel as God's son in their exodus from Egypt, and conveys the special choice of the people for God's provision and care. God loves his children by always seeking their well-being. (Ex. 4:22)
 - Shepherd – Similarly, God relates to his special people as the protector and guide of sheep. This too indicates God's care and leadership, with special emphasis on protection from enemies. (Ps. 23 / Ps. 100:3)
 - Judge – God's depiction as judge indicates his interest in the behavior of human beings and his intervention to hold them accountable. He is the sole arbiter of the merits of a person's deeds or heart, and executes his judgement in wrath for sinners or mercy for the righteous. (Rom. 2:1-11 / Ps. 7:6-9)
- ❖ In Praise of God
 - Psalm 23
- ❖ Thought Questions
 - What does it mean to have a 'personal relationship' with God? What insight does this way of speaking give for how a person (even yourself) thinks about God?
 - Is it necessary to juxtapose God's love and mercy on one hand, with God's justice and wrath on the other? What negative characteristics of God might be implied by thinking of these concepts as different temperaments of God?
 - Is human fatherhood a reflection of God as the True Father? Or is the biblical image of God as Father a metaphor based on just the best qualities of human fatherhood? Would your answer be the same about shepherds and judges?

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LESSON 6: HOW LONG, O LORD? – God’s and the Problem of Evil

- ❖ The Problem of Evil: How can a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and eternally loving tolerate the existence of evil (e.g. injustice, pain, death) in the world?
- ❖ Theodicy – any theory attempting to vindicate God from the existence of evil
 - from Gr. *theos* (God) and *dike* (judgement)
- ❖ Approaches to Theodicy
 - All theodicies inevitably deal with the complex issues of divine determinism and human free will. To some extent, any attempt to explain God’s permission of evil either sacrifices something about God’s power, or God’s love
 - ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY – God controls all things in the world. Any sense of human agency is reducible to the irrevocable determination of God. Hence, evil exists because God (for reasons only known to God) ordained it to exist.
 - SPIRITUAL GROWTH DEFENSE – God creates the world in such a way that evil exists for the purpose of human development. Humans are intentionally created incomplete, and only reach full spiritual maturity through the experience of pain. Thus, evil exists are part of the process of God’s redemption of human beings.
 - OPEN THEISM – reduces God’s omniscience to only the past and present. God is not able to see or determine the future, which comes about only through the free choices of human beings. Thus, it also reduces God’s power to the sphere of influence, rather than coercion. In many accounts, power by coercion is incompatible with God’s love. Thus, evil is entirely the responsibility of humans, and God cannot be held responsible, but nor can he ever finally and fully stop it.
 - FREE-WILL DEFENSE – all evil is the result of the misuse of human freedom to act against the will and purposes of God. God can still act in the world, but only by ‘secondary causes’ which are corrupted. Thus, God acts perfectly, but humans can distort his actions. Humans are responsible for moral evils, but it is unclear of the cause of ‘natural evils’ (e.g. earthquakes, hurricanes, diseases, etc.)
- ❖ God in the Whirlwind
 - The Book of Job is the most profound treatment of the Problem of Evil in Scripture. In it, God allows Job to suffer the loss of all of his family and livelihood. Job and his friends debate about the potential reasons why these tragedies have occurred. His friends insist Job has done something to deserve it, but Job maintains his righteousness.
 - In Job 38, Job eventually calls on God to answer for why he has suffered. However, God’s appearance in the whirlwind does not answer Job’s questions. Instead, God overwhelms Job with the complexity of the universe. The point of this is to say that God’s knowledge and purposes are above human comprehension.
 - The takeaway is that no theodicy works on its own. Attempts to answer ‘why’ God ultimately allows evil are unproductive and nonsense in God’s eyes. The proper response is to trust that God has his purposes, and will make all things right in the end.

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❖ Sin, Death & 'The Satan'

- If God must eventually overcome evil, he must overcome Sin, Death, and the dark powers of the world
- Sin – The Scriptural concept of sin acknowledges human freedom to act contrary to and deny God's will. The Hebrew term *khata* [kha-TAH] means to 'miss the mark,' which means to fail to live up to the goal of reflecting God's image into the world. The Greek terms *hamartia* [ha-mar-TEE-uh] is used by the Apostle Paul to describe an enslaving force who draws its power from people who fail to serve God (Rom. 6:8-11). Actions against God's will are manifestations of both senses of the term. Therefore, sin contributes to the corruption of the self and the world, and cause much of our pain and suffering.
- Death – Death is the height of human pain and suffering, and God's mandated outcome for sinful human nature (Rom. 6:23). Death, being the separation of life or spirit from the body, is an undoing of God's creation of human beings in Eden (Gen. 2). And death refers to the ongoing state of being 'non-living,' in which a person stays 'dead.'
- Satan & Demons – In Scripture, 'The Satan' (meaning 'the adversary') is a figure who deliberately opposes the purposes of God. He works to undermine the glory of God in the world by sowing hatred and division among humans. Other beings that have a similar purpose are demons, who are pictured as The Satan's subjects. Demons work on both personal and societal levels to exploit human selfishness and frailty to bring about sin and death. Although Scripture is not clear about why The Satan and Demons exist, there are hints that they may have been a member of God's Divine Council who rebelled against God (see Is. 14:12-14, Ez. 28:14-18, Gen. 6:1-4). It is important to see that these beings are fallen creatures, not co-divine beings who engage in an eternal struggle with God.

❖ The Problem of Evil is God's problem to solve, not just an argument against God. Only the Transcendent and Immanent God of Scripture can solve the problem and make all things right. This is the thrust of our belief in God's Salvation and Redemption of humankind and the world.

❖ In the face of present evil until God Scripture offers us his PROVIDENCE through a triple tradition of Lament, Remembrance, and Hope.

- Lament is a human call to God for rescue.
- Remembrance is the human reminder of God's saving actions for all his people.
- Hope is the human awaiting for God to appear to rescue us.

❖ In Praise of God

- Psalm 89 (esp. v. 49-52) / Psalm 22: 1-5

❖ Thought Questions

- Which of the four theodicy sketches seems to align most closely with God's response to Job when he questioned God's justice?
- In what ways is the biblical attitude of lament useful for Christians who are experiencing pain and suffering?
- What purpose does God's Providence (that is, that through his foreknowledge and power, he provides for the physical and spiritual benefits of humanity) have within God's solution to the problem of evil? Does providence have limitations?

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LESSON 7: THE GOD OF ISRAEL – The Story of Yahweh, Israel, and the Blessing of the World

- ❖ Moving beyond the attributes of God, we now have God revealed through his actions within the history of his creation.
- ❖ The Fall
 - Humanity is created to fill the earth as the bearers of God's image in the world.
 - The fellowship between God and humanity is broken by sin in the Garden, resulting in a curse upon humanity and the Earth.
 - The world is corrupted in the generation of Noah.
 - The pride of humanity endures at the Tower of Babel.
- ❖ The Call of Abraham
 - God calls a single person Abraham out of the land of his forefathers to go to a new country and form a new people.
 - God promises Abraham a new land and a nation of descendants through whom all nations of the world would be blessed.
- ❖ The Exodus
 - Abraham's descendants become enslaved to a foreign ruler and his gods in Egypt.
 - God raises up Moses, through whom Egypt is stricken and the people are released.
 - The new nation of Israel is covenanted to Yahweh at Sinai.
- ❖ The Monarchy
 - Despite God leading Israel back into their promised land, Israel is often to their covenant with Yahweh, and becomes like other nations around them, demanding a human king.
 - God's kingdom within Israel is best embodied by the Shepherd King David, by whom the nation expands, including the establishment of Jerusalem, and the building of the Temple (constructed by his son Solomon).
- ❖ The Exile
 - After David, the monarchy continues to devolve. The nation of Israel is split along tribal lines. The northern tribes fall into idolatry, are exiled, and phased out of history. The southern tribes are somewhat more faithful, but eventually fall under similar exile by foreign captors.
 - Despite a 'remnant' of Jews being allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem, Israel remained under the power of foreign rulers for centuries.
- ❖ Symbols of God's Election of Israel
 - The 'Scandal of Particularity' – the idea that salvation is not general, direct and universal, but that God chooses specific agents of his favor by which redemption is enacted. This principle is embodied by God's election of Israel.
 - COVENANT/TORAH – otherwise known as the 'Law of Moses,' the commands of Yahweh became the basis for Israel as a religious-political entity, and lasting cultural force in the world.
 - TEMPLE – the ritual place of God's dwelling among his people, and thus the place for mercy and forgiveness. As the primary symbol of God's fellowship with Israel,

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it was to be the place from which God's glory would be made known to the rest of the world.

- SABBATH – the counterpart in time what the Temple was for space. The Sabbath set the regular rhythm for Jewish life and calendar, and was a reminder that God seeks final rest with his people.
- LAND – the land promised to the forefathers of Israel was a telling marker for their faithfulness to God. Israel's fellowship with God was often determinable by the condition of the land (whether it yielded resources for living) and its possession by Israel.
- WORD/PROPHETS – especially in the days when Israel was failing the covenant, certain men were directly called by God to proclaim the 'word of God.' These 'prophets' could predict future events related to Israel, and often used vivid imagery, poetry, and symbolic action to warn the nation to remain faithful to Yahweh.

❖ The Living God

- God's purpose to redeem the world is a function of his role as creator.
- He doesn't save people out of the world, but he wants to save people for the sake of the world, and his glorification in it.
- Yahweh is not just another tribal deity, he is the Living God who rules over all time and space, but does so through particular actions in history which reveal his aims and purposes.

❖ In Praise of God

- Isaiah 49: 1-7 / Romans 9:3-5

❖ Thought Questions

- What do we learn about God from telling the story of Israel that we don't learn from studying God's attributes?
- How is God's call of Abraham a turning point in God's plan to redeem the world?
- Why is the notion of an 'electing God' potentially offensive? How can we maintain that God still desires fellowship with all people if we also believe that God acts in particular ways which favor some people over others?

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LESSON 8: GOD WITH US – The Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth

- ❖ The heart of Christian theology is that God is revealed in the life, prophetic ministry, and especially the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.
- ❖ The Kingdom of God
 - Throughout the period of the exile, the prophets looked for the restoration of Judah/Israel as the time and means of God's salvation. This would be the time for Yahweh to return to the Temple, David's heirs restored to the kingship, and the people established in righteousness as a light to the nations. (Jer. 31 / Ez. 37,43 / Is. 40-55 / Joel 2-3 / Zech. 9 / Dan. 2,7, etc.)
 - As Israel's history came into the first century their 'exile' continued under occupation of the Roman Empire.
 - The royal announcements of Jesus birth to Mary, Jewish shepherds and pagan wise men proclaimed him as the long-awaited King and Savior of Israel, the Messiah, Son of God. He is called 'Immanuel' ('God with us').
 - As an adult, Jesus begins preaching that he is ushering in the 'Kingdom of God,' making claims and performing actions which are reserved for the authority of Yahweh and the election of Israel
 - Claimed to be the royal Son of Man, Calling (12!) disciples, teaches on the fulfillment of the covenant Law of Moses, asserts authority over the Temple, claims to be Lord of the Sabbath, granted forgiveness of sins, healed the sick, exercised demons, confronted unrighteousness, controlled nature, claimed unity with God as 'Father,' etc. etc.
 - Jesus identity is defined by his association with Yahweh as the God of Israel who establishes his kingdom in the earth as a means of salvation for all the world. Thus, Jesus acts both as God, and as what God intended for his creation.
- ❖ The Victory of God
 - But Jesus' kingdom was unlike human kingdoms. It was for the humble, mourners, peacemakers, etc. and was expressed in humility. A prime example is the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem as king mounted on a humble colt.
 - Ultimately, God's victory over sin, death and evil is won not by overthrowing his enemies but by suffering at their hands. He is fraudulently convicted by Israel and turned over to the Romans to be executed as a criminal.
 - As the Messiah, Jesus stands in for the sins of his people and endures the ultimate evil of humanity. He dies bearing the penalty of human sin.
 - The sacrifice of Jesus is the hidden victory of God over the dark forces of evil, who are 'condemned' and 'disarmed' by executing the innocent Son of God.
 - God's victory is manifested in Jesus' resurrection as an act of renewed creation in which sin and death no longer have any effect.
 - Jesus gives God's Spirit to his followers to proclaim his authority as Lordship over Heaven and Earth, and make disciples of all nations of the world, thus fulfilling the divine promises to David, and all the way back to Abraham.
- ❖ The Incarnation of God
 - Early Christians spoke about Jesus as the incarnation of God in two ways:

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- As the One God of Israel – Compare Duet. 6:4 to 1 Cor. 8:6; and Is. 45:18-25 to Phil. 2:9-11
- As the Creator God – see Col. 1:15-16 and John 1:1-18
- Some considerations for what the Incarnation reveals to us about the nature and character of God:
 - The character of God is revealed in the cross, where the eternal God shows love and solidarity with humanity by suffering and dying as a human being. God is able to relate to humanity and suffer with them through the pain and evils of the world.
 - The ‘scandal of particularity’ first recognized in God’s election of Israel is specified further in recognizing Jesus as the single person through whom God chooses to reveal himself and offer salvation. Only by acknowledging Jesus’ brand of kingship can one know God. Thus, Jesus is the ‘mediator of a new covenant.’ (Heb. 8:6, 9:15)
 - The point of God’s plan of salvation through the promises to Abraham was to bless all the world. Because redemption is accomplished in Christ, it is thus open to all people. This underscores the biblical notion that ‘God is no respecter of persons.’
 - Understanding Jesus as God in an ontological sense is more difficult. Christians in the centuries following the Apostles developed the idea of the DUAL NATURE OF CHRIST which indicates that Jesus was two unified (not separate) natures in one person.
- ❖ In Praise of God
 - Luke 2: 8-14 / Romans 8:31-39
- ❖ Thought Questions
 - Based on the description above of Jesus’ prophetic ministry, how would you define the phrase ‘Kingdom of God’? How would you define ‘The Gospel?’
 - In a previous lesson we discussed ‘impassibility’ as one of God’s transcendent attributes. Look back at that definition. In light of Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross, should we re-evaluate that as an attribute of God?
 - Was it necessary for Jesus to die to be the Messiah who would save Israel and the world? (Consider Peter in Matt. 16:13-23) What does the eventual crucifixion of the Messiah mean for our understanding of God’s purpose to save humanity? What does it mean for understanding God’s character?

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LESSON 9: FATHER, SON & SPIRIT – The Trinity of God revealed in salvation

- ❖ Some consider the TRINITY early in a study of God as a reflection upon God's inner being (ontology). However, this class treats this topic until near the end as a reflection upon the manner of God's saving activity for the world.
- ❖ Scriptural Basis
 - The term 'Trinity' does not appear in Scripture. However, belief in one God as a tri-unity of three persons is still rooted in the way that Scripture reveals the dynamic activity of God in creation and redemption of the world.
 - The OT contains various 'personifications' of God described as separate entities. These do not amount to a Trinity, but they describe the work of God in ways in that stretch the limits of a 'unitarian' account of God.
 - Wisdom of God – prominent in Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes), the figure of Wisdom is said to be involved in creation and an influence for righteous behavior. (Prov. 8)
 - Word of God – a figure of God's authority, God's Word goes into the world to confront humanity with God's will. (Is. 55:10-11)
 - Spirit of God – God's energy and personal presence in the world. The Spirit is active in creation and in the Messiah, and is the agent for restoration of life and new creation. (Gen. 1:2, Is. 42:1-3, Ez. 37:1-14)
 - The three-fold pattern of God's saving activity is clearly discerned in the NT.
 - The Father is divine as the God whose purpose is for fellowship with his creation. The Son is divine as the incarnation of God who defeats sin by his death/resurrection.
 - The Holy Spirit is divine as the presence of the Father and the Son to enable God's people to accomplish his will.
 - Christ's ministry is empowered by the Spirit in his baptism
 - The teaching of Jesus' disciples is authorized by the Spirit of God
 - The Spirit reveals truth, transforms lives toward love and righteousness, makes God present in individual lives, and guarantees future salvation.
 - The Trinitarian pattern of God's salvation is manifested throughout the NT, especially Paul's letters – see Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Thess. 1:2-5; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Titus 3:4-6.
 - The story of God as known in the church is a Trinitarian story.
- ❖ Divinity in Three Persons
 - The Godhead is a Tri-unity of the Father, Son & Spirit. These exist as three separate persons so that the Father, Son and Spirit are not each other, but they all exist as God, and collectively as the One God of Scripture.
 - Church history introduces a number of terms to try to explain this:
 - NATURE – the essential properties and characteristics that make a thing what it is. The doctrine of the Trinity states that the three persons of the Godhead have one divine nature in common.

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- PERSON – individual traits, thoughts and actions are characteristic of ‘personhood.’ The three persons of the Trinity are distinguished from one another in their distinct actions in God’s work of creation and salvation.
 - RELATION – The three persons of the Trinity are related to one another. Classically, this relies on the biblical images that the Son is ‘begotten’ by the Father (John 1:14) and that the Spirit is breathed out by the Father and the Son (John 20:21-23).
 - ESSENTIAL TRINITY – one particular approach to talking about the Trinity which focuses on God’s ‘internal being,’ that is, who God is.
 - ECONOMIC TRINITY – another particular approach to talking about the Trinity which focuses on God’s actions in the ‘economy of salvation.’ This is a Trinitarian view of what God does.
 - This labels the Trinity as ‘Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer.’
- ❖ Common Misunderstandings
- Misleading accounts of the Trinity typically emphasize one side of the doctrinal balance over the other, either the ‘one-ness’ of God or the ‘three-ness’ of God.
 - MODALISM – only one God exists, and he acts in three different ‘modes’ or ‘masks.’ This denies the actual persons of the Trinity.
 - TRI-THEISM – the Father, Son & Spirit exists as three distinct, autonomous gods. This denies biblical monotheism in favor of a view that is closer to polytheism.
 - We should remember that the truth of the Trinity is not grounded in the terminology, but in the biblical witness to the One God’s actions in history in three persons to save his people and his creation.
- ❖ Reflections on a Triune God
- God as a communal being – God is in himself a community of persons. God’s purpose for fellowship with creation is patterned on a fellowship that already exists within God.
 - Salvation as a predestination of God’s love – It is inherent to God’s nature to love and desire for ‘another.’ This is the reason for God’s decision to create and then redeem the world. The salvation of God described in Ephesians 1, which is the work of the Father, Son and Spirit, is predestined in God’s love.
 - Trinity and Praise – All persons of the Trinity are worthy of our prayer and praise as the True and Living God. The Father, Son and Spirit should all be acknowledged in our discourse to, and about, God.
- ❖ In Praise of God
- 2 Corinthians 1:19-22 / 1 Thessalonians 1:2-5
- ❖ Thought Questions
- What does it mean that the story of God as known in the church is a Trinitarian story?
 - What distinctive ideas do either of the Trinitarian labels ‘Father/Son/Spirit’ and ‘Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer’ carry that the other does not? Is one preferable to the other?
 - In what ways is belief in God as Father, Son and Spirit practical? Are there ways that the Trinity affects our lives more deeply than a simple ‘unitarian’ view of God might?

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LESSON 10: ALPHA & OMEGA – The God who makes all things new

- ❖ Just as God is revealed in history through Jesus and Scripture, the knowledge of God will be complete at the end of time, when God acts decisively in Christ again to complete the redemption of his creation.
- ❖ Both Now and Not Yet
 - The New Testament considers the Kingdom of God to be accomplishing something new that has happened in the world. The Christian church, as the agents for that Kingdom, are a 'new creation' in Christ. (2 Cor. 5:17)
 - God's work in the world today is one of INAUGURATED ESCHATOLOGY – a term which expresses the idea that the future salvation God will bring is already 'inaugurated' and being accomplished in the present.
 - Jesus' resurrection is the signpost that future new creation is arrived now. He is the 'first-fruits' of the eventual bodily resurrection of all of God's people. Thus, Christians marked out as united to Christ's death and resurrection in baptism now 'walk in newness of life.' (Rom. 6:4)
 - Likewise, God's Holy Spirit is the manifestation of a new age in which God calls all people to himself. (Acts 2) Further, the Spirit dwells in the lives of Christians to bear fruit for godly behavior (Gal. 5) and to guarantee the future inheritance of eternal life (Eph. 1)
 - Both of these signals are born out of the Triune God, and have links back to seeing the new humanity as the new image-bearers of God, reflecting his glory to the world
- ❖ The Day of the Lord
 - Gods' final return to earth will involve taking account of all human life.
 - What the OT prophets called 'The Day of the Lord,' when Yahweh would return to exact judgment on his enemies, is carried out the New Testament by Jesus in his 'second coming' to pronounce sentence on all mankind.
 - The NT contains several images of final punishment, including the destruction of the earth by fire (2 Pet. 3), Gehenna/Hell (several of Jesus teachings/parables) and the Lake of Fire (Rev. 21)
 - While there is a plethora of warnings of God's judgment in Christ, the NT also highlights God's LONG-SUFFERING – that he delays judgment, that all humans might come to repentance
- ❖ New Heavens and New Earth
 - Scripture pictures the Christian's final destination of 'Heaven' as an apocalyptic event of new creation, involving:
 - The resurrection of the body to be made like Jesus (Phil. 3:21)
 - The restoration of all things (Acts 3:21)
 - New Heavens and New Earth (2 Pet. 3:13)
 - The most vivid picture of this is from Revelation 21 & 22 in which the New Jerusalem comes from Heaven so that God may dwell among humanity:
 - In this place, there is no Temple, because God is the Temple
 - There is no Sun or Moon, because God is the light
 - The Tree of Life is there to preserve eternity for God's children

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❖ In Praise of God

- Romans 8: 18-25 / Revelation 21:1-7

❖ Thought Questions

- What are some aspects of the Christian life that express the tension between salvation as a present reality, but also a future expectation?
- When it comes to Hell, some believe that it is outside of God's character to allow eternal suffering, even of those who reject God, and so believe that ultimately all people will be saved, even perhaps from out of Hell. What is this belief trying to affirm? What are the problems with this view?
- What part of the description of the New Heavens and New Earth in Revelation 21 & 22 resonates most with you as a symbol of hope? Why?