

## Key Bible Doctrines

### Part 1: The Authority of the Bible / The Nature of God / Angels, Demons and Satan

The Bible contains a number of critical doctrines, or teachings, which form the foundation of the Christian faith. These include, for example, teachings on the authority of the Bible, the nature of God, the basis of salvation through Jesus Christ, and future events. From the early church to the present day the development of Bible doctrine has been an ongoing source of controversy and often violent conflict. But through the struggles of those who have gone before, steady progress has been made towards a fuller and more precise understanding of Bible doctrine. This also has led to a greater distinction between Christian teachings which are based on the Bible and those which are the mere inventions of men for their own purposes.

An understanding of the key Bible doctrines is essential if Christians are to withstand the beguiling ways of the world which can rob us of our freedom in Christ. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). The apostle Paul considered sound doctrine to be essential to the faith, and instructed Timothy, a young church leader, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearer” (1 Timothy 4:16).

Paul understood that Satan was the arch enemy of the truth, and warned Timothy that “in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:1-2). Again, he warned that “the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

The study of Bible doctrine involves a careful analysis of what the Bible teaches us about a given subject. It does not necessarily include a defence or justification of the doctrine, which is the field of *apologetics*. The current papers (Parts 1 to 8) focus on the scriptural basis for the fundamental Christian doctrines, while apologetics arguments are presented in the series *Ultimate Questions*. They are necessarily brief, and the interested reader is encouraged to consult more detailed texts on the subject for a fuller understanding.

#### The Authority of the Bible

*The Bible is the Word of God such that to believe and obey Scripture is to believe and obey God. Conversely, to disbelieve and disobey Scripture is to disbelieve and disobey God.*

Quoting from Deuteronomy 8:4, Jesus taught, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). But where is this Word of God upon which man is to live? In Hebrews 10:1-18, the writer associates the ministry of Christ with the promise of God, given through the prophet Jeremiah, that he would write his laws in the hearts and minds of his faithful believers. Indeed, Jesus did promise to send the Holy Spirit to be with the believers after he left them: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16). But Jesus also made frequent reference to Scripture in his teachings, holding it to be the standard test of God’s will, and thereby requiring the existence of a written form of God’s Word.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is both reasonable and necessary to expect that God would provide a physical

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<sup>1</sup> The word “scripture” literally means “that which is written”.

and enduring record of his commandments and teachings, albeit that this Scripture can only be properly understood by way of the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts and minds of its readers. It is also reasonable to expect that this Scripture comprises the whole Bible, since Christ is the focus of the Scriptures (it has been said that the Old Testament *conceals* Christ while the New Testament *reveals* him).

The following are some examples of scriptural evidence in support of the doctrine that the Bible is the written Word of God:

- The prophets of the Old Testament repeatedly claimed that their words were from God (e.g., Isaiah 43:1; Jeremiah 1:9, 11; Ezekiel 22:1), and that if this was not the case then they would be false prophets (e.g., Numbers 22:38; Deuteronomy 18:17-20; Jeremiah 14:14; Ezekiel 2:7; 13:1-16). Also, God is often said to speak through the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah 37:2; Zechariah 7:7, 12).
- The apostle Paul said that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16), while the apostle Peter taught that “prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).
- Jesus used the Scriptures to support his claim to be the Messiah whose coming was predicted in these same Scriptures (e.g., Matthew 5:17; Luke 4:16-21; 24:25-27; John 5:39-40, 45-47; 10:34-36).
- Jesus often supported his teachings by reference to scriptures in the Old Testament (e.g., Matthew 5:1-48; 21:42-44; John 2:22; 7:38; 13:18). On one occasion, he rebuked the leaders of a Jewish sect for holding to a false doctrine telling them, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matthew 22:29).
- Quoting from Psalm 82:6, Jesus confirmed that, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35), testifying to its eternal authority. Similarly, in regard to his own teachings, Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35).
- Jesus used Scripture to resist Satan (Matthew 4:1-7), demonstrating the authority of God’s Word over him.
- Jesus instructed his disciples to obey his words (e.g., John 8:31-32; 14:23-24) which he claimed were the same as those of the Father (e.g., John 7:16; 12:49-50).
- Jesus promised his disciples, “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). He also said to them, “when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come” (John 16:13). These promises reveal how God used the writers of the New Testament to complete the Scriptures.
- The writers of the New Testament frequently used Scripture to support their witness to Christ (e.g., Acts 1:15-17; 2:14-36; 8:32-35; 17:2-3; Romans 3:1-15:22; Hebrews 1:1-13:21). Paul described himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:1-2). In 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter compares the teachings of Paul to “other Scripture”, and in 1 Corinthians 14:37, Paul claimed that, “what I am writing to you is the Lord’s commandment.”
- In Revelation 1:1-2, John testifies that what he has written is “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.” At the end of the book he warns the reader that God will punish anyone who adds to or subtracts anything from “the words of the prophecy of this book” (Revelation 22:18-19).

It is clear from these, and many other examples, that the authors of the Bible understood that the whole Bible is the Word of God. Logically, therefore, to believe the teachings of the Bible

is to believe God, and to obey the teachings of the Bible is to obey God. Conversely, to disbelieve or disobey the Bible is to disbelieve or disobey God (cf. John 14:23-24).

There is also strong external evidence to support the Bible's claim to be the Word of God. This is presented in the paper *Is the Bible the Word of God?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*. But perhaps the most powerful evidence of all is the credibility of the Bible itself, as noted by Wayne Grudem in *Bible Doctrine*<sup>2</sup> (p. 38):

*Ultimately, the truthfulness of the Bible will commend itself as being far more persuasive than other religious books ... or than any other intellectual constructions of the human mind ... It will be more persuasive because, in the actual experience of life, all of these other candidates for ultimate authority are seen to be inconsistent or to have shortcomings that disqualify them, while the Bible will be seen to be fully in accord with all that we know about the world around us, about ourselves, and about God. ... The trouble is that because of sin our perception and analysis of God is faulty. Therefore, it requires the work of the Holy Spirit, overcoming the effects of sin, to enable us to be persuaded that the Bible is indeed the Word of God and that the claims it makes for itself are true – Wayne Grudem.*

Once we accept that the Bible is the written Word of God, there are certain corollaries which follow:

- The Scriptures must be truthful because God cannot lie (Psalm 12:6; Proverbs 8:8-9; 30:5; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18).<sup>3</sup>
- The Scriptures are able to be understood by anyone seeking God's help and willing to obey his teachings (cf. Psalm 19:7; 119:130; Matthew 5:6; 13:10-17; John 8:31-32). However, to the unrighteous the Scriptures appear to be foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:2-4).
- The Scriptures are necessary for the knowledge of God's will and for spiritual growth (e.g., Psalm 1:1-2; Matthew 4:4; John 15:1-4; Romans 10:13-17). However, they are not necessary for knowing that God exists or for knowing something about his character and moral laws (Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:18-32).
- At each stage of redemptive history the Scriptures contained everything that God's people needed in order to know his will and attain salvation (Deuteronomy 29:29; Psalm 19:7-11; 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

These doctrines on the authority and nature of Scripture show that a proper understanding of the Bible requires the student to have a personal relationship with God, who is both its author and our teacher. The believer cannot rely on the church, or some religious leader or Bible scholar to interpret the Bible for him or her, but is responsible for developing his or her own faith. They also sound a clear warning against adding to or subtracting from what God has said in the Bible, and against misinterpreting the Scriptures for evil purposes (cf. Proverbs 30:6; 1 Timothy 5:3-5). Instead, the believer should hold the Bible in high regard, for it is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

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<sup>2</sup> *Bible Doctrine: Essential teachings of the Christian faith* by Wayne Grudem, published by InterVarsity Press, Leicester, England, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> This is often referred to as the "inerrancy of Scripture". However, this term is difficult to define and its use without a clear definition runs the risk of overshadowing the critical role of the Holy Spirit in providing and revealing Scripture to the believer (cf. John 14:26; 16:13).

## The Nature of God

In this section we investigate what the Bible says about the nature of God.<sup>4</sup> But first, it is important to understand that *God is knowable*, not just in a factual sense, but in a personal and intimate way. Agnostics believe that we can know nothing beyond material phenomena, and therefore that God, and indeed the whole spiritual realm, is unknowable. This belief is not supported by Scripture or the experience of countless believers throughout history. It is true that we can never *fully* know God, because “his greatness no-one can fathom” (Psalm 145:3). Yet, as we walk with him and study the Bible, we will come to know him intimately, as a close friend (cf. John 15:15). In Jeremiah we read:

This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Similarly, when Jesus prayed for the disciples he said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3; see also Hebrews 8:11 and 1 John 2:3; 4:8; 5:20).

### The Attributes of God

The following are some of the key attributes of God:

- *God is eternal.* This means that God had no beginning, does not experience any succession of moments in his own existence, and will never end (Psalm 90:2; 102:27; 2 Peter 3:8; Jude 25; Revelation 1:8; 4:8). Nevertheless, God does interact with his creation in time (Isaiah 46:9-10; Galatians 4:4-5).
- *God is spirit.* This means that God exists as a being unlike anything in the creation (John 4:24; 2 Corinthians 3:17). We also have a spiritual nature housed within our physical bodies (Romans 8:16; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; 6:12).<sup>5</sup> Our spirits were not created, but instead were breathed into us by God (Genesis 2:7).<sup>6</sup>
- *God is omnipresent.* This means that God exists everywhere at once, and does not have size or dimensions (1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 139:7-10; Jeremiah 23:23-24; Amos 9:1-4). Nevertheless, God does act differently in different places (Joshua 1:9; Psalm 16:11; Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 59:2).
- *God is omniscient.* This means that God knows everything; nothing is hidden from him (Psalm 33:13-15; Hebrews 4:13; 1 John 3:20). From the beginning God has shared his knowledge with his faithful people and this, in turn, has allowed societies to advance (2 Chronicles 1:10; Psalm 119:66; Proverbs 1:7; 2:6).<sup>7</sup>
- *God is omnipotent.* This means that God is all-powerful; there is nothing he wills that he cannot do (Jeremiah 32:17; Matthew 19:27; Revelation 1:8). Of course, God cannot do anything against his own nature; for example, he cannot lie (Titus 1:2), he cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> For evidence on the existence of God outside of Scripture, refer to the papers *Does God Exist?* and *Was Jesus Christ God?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*.

<sup>5</sup> This spiritual nature is also called the *soul*. It appears to be intimately connected with our emotions (figuratively, our “heart”), and our conscience (Job 27:6; Romans 2:15; Matthew 22:37; 1 Timothy 4:2).

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that our spirits are eternal, like God, because God has the power to “destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

<sup>7</sup> Conversely, societies that do not know God remain primitive and barbaric.

tempted by evil (James 1:13-14), and he cannot deny himself (i.e., go against his own nature) (2 Timothy 2:13).

- *God is independent.* This means that God does not need anything; he is self-sufficient and complete in and of himself (Psalm 50:9-12; Acts 17:24-25). However, God does derive pleasure from his creation (e.g., Zephaniah 3:17; Ephesians 1:11-12).
- *God is unchanging.* Since God is perfect (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 18:30), he cannot improve and he cannot become imperfect (if he could, then he would not have been perfect in the first place). Therefore, he cannot change (Psalm 102:25-27; James 1:17).<sup>8</sup>
- *God is love.* The Greek word used to describe God as love is *agape*, which may be translated as “charity” or “benevolent love” (1 John 4:8). It is a self-giving love which is not necessarily shown by doing what the person loved desires, but by what is best for that person (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13). The Hebrew equivalent may be translated as “loving-kindness”, and includes the concepts of mercy, kindness, favour, loyalty, benevolence and good will (e.g., Psalm 5:7).
- *God is wisdom and truth.* Wisdom is the ability to make good use of knowledge, while truth is correct knowledge. But God does not only possess wisdom and truth, he *is* wisdom and truth (Psalm 31:5; Proverbs 8:1-36; Isaiah 11:2; 28:29; Jeremiah 10:12; John 1:14; 14:6; Romans 11:33-34). As with knowledge, God gives wisdom and truth freely to his faithful people (Psalm 43:3; 51:6; 111:10; Proverbs 2:6; 3:13; John 8:31-32; James 1:5).
- *God is purposeful.* This means that God has a plan for his creation and a sovereign will to carry out that plan (Job 36:5; Isaiah 46:10; Ephesians 1:11-12; Revelation 4:11). Some of God’s plan is revealed to his people, but much of it will remain a secret until it is realised (Deuteronomy 29:29; Matthew 11:25-26).

There are many other qualities of God revealed in the Scriptures. For example, of his moral qualities we can say that God *is* goodness (Luke 18:9), holiness (Isaiah 6:3), faithfulness, righteousness and graciousness (Exodus 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 11:7). As we would expect, God hates sin and evil (Romans 1:18; 2:5), but we are also told that he is sometimes grieved by the disobedience of his people (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30), and is fiercely jealous (i.e., protective) of his own honour (Exodus 34:14; Isaiah 48:11). We also learn that he is the measure of perfection (Matthew 5:48), blessedness (i.e., happiness) (Matthew 5:3-12) and beauty (Psalm 27:24). In regard to his moral qualities, Paul said, “Be imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1).

### God is Not Part of the Creation

The first three attributes of God listed above, his eternity, spirituality and omnipresence, while they are consistent with the Bible’s claim that God is the Creator of the universe (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 102:25; Romans 1:20; Colossians 1:16), also show that he is not part of the creation itself, as claimed by the Eastern and New Age religions. Modern physics has shown that the cosmos is composed of the four distinct, but interdependent and ever changing, elements of matter, energy, space and time. Yet, none of these can be used to describe God; he is not composed of matter or energy, he does not occupy space,<sup>9</sup> and he is not constrained by time.<sup>10</sup> Rather, God exists outside of, and is greater than, the creation

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<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that he cannot change his mind when dealing with people (such as in Exodus 18:23-32; 32:9-14; Jonah 3:4-10).

<sup>9</sup> The reader should be careful not to think of God as being infinitely large, because size (space) is a concept which applies to the creation and not to God.

<sup>10</sup> Again, the reader should not wonder where God came from, because God had no beginning and has no end – he just is (cf. Revelation 1:8).

itself. In the next section we will consider another attribute of God which is foreign to the creation.

### The Trinity

*God exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.*

The word *trinity* means “three-in-oneness” and is used to summarise the teaching of Scripture that God is three persons yet one God. The triune nature of God is alluded to in the Old Testament, but is most clearly revealed in the New Testament.

Several passages in the Old Testament suggest that God exists as more than one person. In Genesis 1:26-27 we read, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image ...’ So God created man in his own image ...” Similarly, in Genesis 3:22 and 11:7. In Isaiah 6:8, God speaks of himself in both the singular and plural: “Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us?”

Other Old Testament passages reveal a clear distinction between the three persons of God. In Psalm 45:7, two persons are referred to, both of whom are called *God*: “You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.” Similarly, in Psalm 110:1 we read, “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit here at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” From the New Testament we learn that these two persons are God the Father and God the Son (cf. Hebrews 1:8-9 and Matthew 22:41-46). There are also several passages which refer to “the angel of the Lord” who is also called “God” or “the Lord” and is evidently Jesus Christ (e.g., Genesis 16:11-13; Exodus 3:2-6; 23:20-21). The Holy Spirit is also seen to possess a distinct personality in Isaiah 63:10 where we learn that God’s people “rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.”

The New Testament provides more explicit teaching on the triune nature of God. When Jesus was baptised, all three members of the Trinity were present: “As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” (Matthew 3:16-17). At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus commanded his disciples, “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). See also 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Peter 1:2, and Jude 20-21.

Many passages in the New Testament confirm the divinity of Christ. For example, Paul taught that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9), while John, referring to Christ as “the Word”, proclaimed, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2, cf. v. 14). Jesus himself confirmed this in several places (e.g., John 10:30; 14:9). The Holy Spirit is also seen to be fully God. For example, in Psalm 139:7-12, David testifies that the Spirit of God is omnipresent, as does Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 where he adds that “the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.”

We see, therefore, that God exists as three distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that each person is fully God. But we are also told throughout the Bible that there is only one God! (See, for example, Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Isaiah 45:5-6; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:5; James 2:19.) This is one of the great mysteries of God that our human minds cannot fully comprehend, and which shows God to exist beyond anything contained within the creation.

### The Relationships Within the Trinity

We have seen that all three persons of the Trinity are equally God. This means that they each share the same attributes, and no one person is superior to the others in this regard. However, the Bible also shows that they each have distinct roles, and that there is a clear chain-of-command in regard to the performance of their respective duties. As we would expect, the

Father is the head, and it is he who directs the other two (e.g., John 14:28; 15:10). To the Son was given the great commission of being the Saviour of the world (e.g., John 3:16; 6:38); and to the Holy Spirit was given the responsibility of working with the believers to bring them to completion in their faith (e.g., John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

The personal relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are perfect in every way. Their love for one another (John 5:20; 14:31), their unity of purpose (John 10:30; 14:9, 11), and their seeking to glorify one another (John 13:31; 15:13-15; Philippians 2:5-11) are the model for our own relationships on earth (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:21-6:4).

### God the Creator

*God created the universe and all that is in it out of nothing, and it was originally very good.*

The Bible clearly teaches that God created the entire universe (including time itself) out of nothing. In Genesis 1:1 we read, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” While the psalmist proclaimed, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. ... For he spoke, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood” (Psalm 33:6, 9; NKJV). Speaking about Christ, Paul said, “by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16). And the writer of Hebrews taught, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:3). These and many other scriptures show that the universe was created by God for his purpose and is subject to his will. Therefore, the materials of which it is composed are not to be considered as having the qualities of God (e.g., to be eternal, or creative, or life giving). Such a position is contrary to the teachings of the Bible.

The Bible also shows that man is special, because only man was created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). In his worship of God, the prophet David prayed, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honour” (Psalm 8:3-5). Jesus, quoting from Psalm 82:6, confirmed that those “to whom the word of God came” are themselves “gods” (John 10:34).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, mankind is not to be considered alongside the animals, or even the angels. Instead, each of us has the potential to become like God through our faith in Christ: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10; cf. Luke 6:40).

After creating the universe and everything in it, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). This statement by itself demolishes all evolutionary theories of creation. Evolution requires advancement through competition, violence, selfishness, and death; it is a process that can only be described as *very bad*. Instead, we are told that these evils entered the creation as a result of the fall of man as described in Genesis 3.<sup>12</sup> But the Scriptures also reveal that God’s plan is to eventually make a new creation for his people which will again be *very good* (Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-24; Revelation 21:1-4).

Although the creation has been corrupted by sin and evil, Paul taught that, “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5). Indeed, we are told that the creation, even in its fallen state, glorifies God: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive

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<sup>11</sup> But note that the psalmist is referring only to the “sons of the Most High” (i.e., the faithful believers), while the wicked will “die like mere men” (Psalm 82:6-7).

<sup>12</sup> The fall of Adam and Eve was possible because God gave them a free will. While this is a good thing to have, it does create the opportunity for rebellion, which was the course that Adam and Eve chose.

glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Revelation 4:11). Therefore, as believers we are to enjoy the creation as a wonderful gift of God, and to praise him because, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge” (Psalm 19:1-2).

### The Providence of God

*God has ordered the creation, and interacts with it, so as to fulfill his purposes.*

The Scriptures tell us that God controls and sustains all of creation. For example, in Hebrews 1:3 we are told that Christ is “sustaining all things by his powerful word.” Similarly, in Colossians 1:17, Paul said of Christ that “in him all things hold together.” A number of passages show that God controls the forces of nature (e.g., Job 37:2-12; 38:4-38; Matthew 8:23-27), and provides for the animals and man (e.g., Psalm 104:10-30; Matthew 6:25-30). The Bible also speaks about God’s control of human affairs, making some nations great and destroying others (e.g., Job 12:23-25; Acts 17:26), and directing the lives of individuals in order to accomplish his will (e.g., Exodus 4:21; 14:4; Jeremiah 1:4-5; 10:23; Proverbs 16:9; Galatians 1:15-16). In short, all of creation exists and acts in accordance with the will and purpose of God (cf. Acts 17:28).

The doctrine of the providence of God is an encouragement to believers because:

- It encompasses the many promises of God to provide for all our needs, to protect us from the dangers of the world, and to strengthen us in times of trouble (e.g., Psalm 91; 121; Isaiah 41:8-10; Philippians 4:19).
- We can be assured that whatever happens to us, good or bad, God has allowed it to happen in order to accomplish his good and perfect will (e.g., Psalm 138:8; Romans 8:28-30; James 1:2-4).
- It teaches everyone, whether they believe in God or not, to fear him (cf. Deuteronomy 10:12-13; Job 28:28; Psalm 33:8; Proverbs 1:7; Luke 12:4-5).

The doctrine of God’s providence raises three important questions: (1) If God controls everything that happens in the world, then do we really have a free will? (2) Does God cause evil? (3) Are some people predestined for salvation and others for destruction?

While the Bible clearly teaches that God is in complete control of his creation, it also teaches that man is fully responsible for his own actions. This is discussed in *Part 2: Mankind – Man Has a Free Will*. Therefore, in regard to the first question, we must conclude that while God controls everything that happens, nevertheless, man has a freewill.

With regard to the second question, the Bible shows that there are occasions when God directly causes bad things to happen (e.g., Isaiah 45:7; Amos 3:6), and other occasions when he allows bad things to happen (Job 1:12). But the Bible also teaches that God is good, righteous and holy. So when he permits evil, we should understand that this is done within the broader context of his righteousness at work in a fallen world.<sup>13</sup> Evil, in effect, is God’s instrument for exercising righteousness in the world and leading sinners to salvation (cf. Luke 13:1-5). Therefore, we must conclude that while God does allow, and even cause, bad things to happen, nevertheless, God himself is good.

The third question is discussed in *Part 4: Election*, but the conclusion is stated here for

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<sup>13</sup> The book of Job explores the difficult question of why God allows bad things to happen to good people. The following points are worth noting: 1. Job was righteous in the eyes of God, and did not deserve his suffering (Job 1:8); 2. It is Satan who conceived of and executed the evil against Job, but God allowed it to happen (Job 1-2); 3. Job’s attempts to derive some meaning and reason for his suffering were in vain (Job 38-41); 4. In the end, God restored to Job, twice over, all that he had lost (Job 42:10). See also the paper *If There is a God, Why is There Evil?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*.

completeness. From the Scriptures we must conclude that while God has predestined some people for salvation and others for destruction, yet God “is patient with [sinners], not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

While these conclusions may appear contradictory, they are in fact true, because this is the clear teaching of Scripture. The apparent contradictions arise because of our limited understanding of God (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33).

## **Angels, Demons and Satan**

The Bible testifies to the existence of angels and demons, and of Satan who is the head of the demons. Jesus confirmed the existence of angels (e.g., Matthew 4:5-7; 18:10), and cast out demons on many occasions (Matthew 4:23-24). He also called Satan the “evil one” (Matthew 6:13), and throughout his teachings Jesus revealed Satan to be the great adversary of God (e.g., John 8:44). To deny the reality of these spiritual beings is to deny not only the truthfulness of the Scriptures, but of Christ as well. Therefore, it is important to have a proper understanding of who these creatures are, and how they operate in the world.

### Angels

*Angels are spiritual beings created by God to serve him.*

Human beings and angels are the only moral, highly intelligent creatures that God has made. However, the Bible shows that angels are quite different from us. For one thing, angels are never said to be made in the image and likeness of God, while human beings are (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6). It is reasonable to conclude from this that we are more like God than the angels. This is supported by the fact that God will someday give us authority over the angels to judge them (1 Corinthians 6:3), although we are “for a little while lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:7). Even now, the angels already serve us: “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14). The ability of human beings to bear children like themselves (cf. Genesis 5:3) is another critical difference between us and the angels, who apparently cannot bear children (cf. Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:34-36). Angels also demonstrate the greatness of God’s love for us in that, while many angels sinned, none were saved (Hebrews 2:16; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

Since they are spirits, angels ordinarily cannot be seen. However, the Bible records occasions when God gave people the ability to see angels (e.g., 2 Kings 6:17; Luke 2:13), and other times when angels appeared to people in bodily form (e.g., Daniel 10:4-6; Matthew 28:2-3).

Two particular types of angels are named in the Bible; the cherubim (e.g., Ezekiel 1 and 10), and the seraphim (Isaiah 6:2-7). These are high-ranking angels (archangels) who attend closely to God and worship him continuously. The Bible also refers to two archangels by name: Michael appears as a commander of an angelic army (Daniel 10:13; 12:1, Revelation 12:7), while Gabriel appears as a divine messenger (Daniel 8:16-26; 9:20-27; Luke 1:11-20, 26-38). Other types of angels are sent to protect us (e.g., Psalm 34:7, 91:11-12). However, there is no clear evidence that God provides a specific “guardian angel” for each believer.<sup>14</sup>

While angels are glorious and powerful creatures (Psalm 103:20), they are not to be worshipped (Colossians 2:18; Revelation 19:10). Nor should we pray to angels, for God alone can answer our prayers, and there is no other mediator between us and God than Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). The Bible also warns against receiving false doctrines from supposed angels (but who are actually demons) (Galatians 1:8; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

Believers should take courage from the fact that God has provided mighty angels to protect us and to minister to us. It is yet another example of his wonderful provision for us, and of the high regard in which he holds us, his special creatures. We should also heed the advice of

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<sup>14</sup> Support for this idea has been found in Matthew 18:10 and Acts 12:15, but the evidence is weak.

Paul: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

### Satan and Demons

*Demons are fallen angels who continually work evil in the world, and Satan is the head of the demons.*

The Bible reveals that soon after the world was created, Satan and a third of the angels rebelled against God and were cast down to the earth (Luke 10:18; Revelation 12:3-4; 7-9). This means that they no longer dwell in the same heaven as God and his angels, but instead inhabit a spiritual realm which is somehow associated with the physical world (Luke 11:24-26; 1 John 4:4). The Bible shows that demons can possess people and animals (Mark 1:32-34; 5:1-13), that they inhabit the places where idols are worshipped (Deuteronomy 32:16-17; Psalm 106:36-38; Revelation 2:9, 13),<sup>15</sup> and that they are capable of causing many kinds of sickness and evil behaviour in those whom they possess (e.g., Matthew 8:28; 12:22; 17:14-18). It also shows that while they are not able to possess anyone filled with the Holy Spirit,<sup>16</sup> they can possess people with evil hearts and cause them to become false teachers and false prophets (Matthew 24:24; 1 Timothy 4:1-2; 2 Peter 2).

Satan is the leader of the fallen angels. The name *Satan* is Hebrew for “adversary”, but before he rebelled, Satan was “the morning star, son of the dawn” (Isaiah 14:12) from which is derived the name *Lucifer*.<sup>17</sup> When he was created, he was “the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty”, and was “anointed as a guardian cherub” (Ezekiel 28:11-19). But Satan became proud and said in his heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13-14). It was this audacious pride that led him to rebel against God.

After he had been cast down to the earth, Satan incited Adam and Eve to rebel against the command of God, thereby bringing about the fall of man (Genesis 3). Ever since then, Satan, who is also called the *devil*, has been the arch enemy of both God and man (Genesis 3:14-15). Jesus called him “the prince of this world” (John 12:31) while Paul called him “The God of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and described him as “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). Peter warns us to “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus described Satan as a thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). He also said that Satan “was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan’s destiny is to be “cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10, NKJV).

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<sup>15</sup> In the Bible, idols represent false religion in general (e.g., Psalm 96:5; Isaiah 42:8; 1 Corinthians 10:19-20).

<sup>16</sup> This is the meaning of the teaching in Luke 11:24-26 where the “house swept clean and put in order” refers to a person from whom a demon has been cast out, and whose sins have been forgiven, but who has not been filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Revelation 9:3-5).

<sup>17</sup> The word *Lucifer* is Latin for “light-bringer”. Jesus is also called the “bright Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16) showing that he has now taken for himself the mantle that Lucifer failed to bear.

## **Acknowledgments**

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated.  
Other versions referred from time to time are:

*Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

*The Spirit Filled Life Bible*, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).