

# The Apostles' Creed

LESSON  
TWO

God the Father  
Discussion Forum



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# The Apostles' Creed

## Lesson Two: God the Father

### Discussion Forum

With

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Dr. Mark Strauss

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

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Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Stephen Wellum

### Question 1:

**Can Scripture teach us reliable truths about God, or is its human language insufficient for this task?**

As Evangelicals, we do our best to base our beliefs about God on the Bible. But the Bible challenges the limitations of our abilities so much that we sometimes disagree about its teachings. Some interpreters have blamed these disagreements on the human languages that the Bible uses to communicate. They think that human language is so inadequate that it's incapable of revealing God to us in meaningful ways. So, if Christians are going base our understanding of God on the Bible, it's important for us to ask this question: Can Scripture teach us reliable truths about God, or is its human language insufficient for this task?

#### **Dr. John Frame**

In the Bible, we know God but we don't know him exhaustively, and of course there's a lot of mystery in our understanding of God. There are lots of times where our minds fail us and where our language fails us. We try to formulate the truth and our language kind of escapes us. But in the Bible we have truth. In the Bible, Jesus says to God, "Your Word is truth." And so we can say for sure, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." We can say for sure, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And we don't claim any great intellectual powers in saying this. We're just reading what God has given to us and trusting him that those things are true. And so, human language does fail at times in speaking about God, but we can be sure that Scripture speaks truth. And it doesn't speak truth exhaustively, but it tells us about God as far as it's possible for us to know him as creatures.

**Question 2:****Do our beliefs about God have any practical relevance for followers of Christ?**

It's one thing to say that the Bible communicates understandable truths about God, and another to say that these truths are worth studying. Many Christians who are unfamiliar with formal theology wonder if the doctrine of God is too abstract to have much bearing on anything in life. They think that our concepts of God's persons, nature, attributes, and so on are very theoretical and disconnected from the practical matters of daily life. But are they right? Do our beliefs about God have any practical relevance for followers of Christ?

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

It's been said that there's only one question that really matters and that is the person of God. "Who is God" is the most important question we could ever ask because on that question every other question is answered. And so we understand who God is and then we're able to understand who we are, what it means to relate to our creator, what it means to be faithful to him and fulfill our intended destinies as people made in his image.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

Our belief about God absolutely influences everything else about us. If we believe God is holy, then we believe that there's a holy vision of God for our money, for instance. That we believe that there's a holy vision of God for our sexuality. If God is love and righteousness, then we believe, perhaps, those things belong in the family, in the things that we do and how we treat our kids, and the way we love our wife will be absolutely reflective of our belief in God and what we believe he is all about. We look down and we see things like the love and discipline of our kids, but also of our classroom and how we believe in God, what we believe about him, is absolutely going to be impacting everything about our lives.

**Question 3:****Do all people have some beliefs about God that are so important that they influence nearly everything else they believe?**

It should be apparent that what Christians believe about God touches everything else we believe. But is this unique to Christianity? Or do all people have some beliefs about God that are so important that they influence nearly everything else they believe?

**Dr. Robert Lister**

The belief about God, again, is of central import to belief about everything else, and that's true whether you're a Christian or a non-Christian. Non-Christians, atheists, perhaps may not call it God but everyone has something that is uppermost in their

value system. So from whatever worldview you come, you have something that is at the center of your personal solar system, so to speak. And that shapes the orbit of everything around it in the rest of our lives, again whether Christian or non-Christian. So, for the Christian, our belief about God shapes our belief about who we are, how we may rightly understand ourselves, what it means to be made in the image of God, what it means to be corrupted and affected by sin, how we may be redeemed from that sin. And similarly, for a non-theist, whatever it is that's uppermost in their hearts' desires and their personal affections and their worldview structure, that is going to shape the orbit of their lives, their lives will revolve around whatever it is they esteem most highly.

### **Question 4:**

#### **Why are human beings prone to turn away from God?**

**All human beings tend to make some beliefs more central in their lives. And this is especially true when it comes to beliefs about God. But this fact raises an important issue that often perplexes followers of Christ: If what we believe about God is so central to all human thought, why are human beings prone to turn away from God?**

#### **Dr. Samuel Ling**

The Bible tells us that all men and women and children know God deep down in their hearts, in their minds, and in their consciences. But Romans 1 tells us that ever since Adam and Eve sinned, that we have turned in the depths of our hearts from worshiping the true God to worshiping idols or anything that's created by God. And so the human heart is practically a factory, a source, the root of all kinds of idols. Well, in North America, in the West, we think of money perhaps as one of the great idols that we worship, but there are more subtle idols such as recreation, and leisure, and a sense of privacy — that I want to be left alone and not to be really well known by my friends — in perhaps non-western cultures as well as western. Perhaps our children and their education, their future, their comfort, might be so important that it's more important than Jesus Christ, and therefore, it is an idol. So, you know, anything that God has given to us, if we place it as more important than the Lord Jesus Christ, can become an idol.

#### **Dr. David Bauer**

The Bible indicates that humans are very prone to turn away from the true God, to false gods. This has to do especially with the Bible's doctrine of sin. It doesn't have to do as much with the fact that we are creatures in relation to the great Creator, but rather that we are sinful creatures in relation to God. Paul talks about this, of course, in Romans 1:18-32. Where he indicates that God has actually revealed at least certain things about himself: his transcendence, his godhood, his immortality, and his goodness through what he has made. So, you do have what scholars refer to as "natural revelation." But Paul, in that same chapter, makes it clear that although God has given revelation of himself through what he has made, and therefore, on that basis, we as creatures should be able to recognize God truly, on the basis of looking

around at creation — that, in fact, sin has come into the picture, and sin acts in such a way as to actually blind us, even with regard to the truth of God, as God has revealed it to us in creation. And so, left to ourselves, we will in fact identify as God, or identify as divine qualities, those things that are not true of God at all. In other words, we will create gods of our own imagination as substitutes for the true God. The only way in which human beings can actually find God and know God, truly as far as the Scriptures are concerned, is in so far as God reveals himself to them, as God takes the initiative in revealing himself. And so, the Bible teaches that the only way that human beings can know God truly is — to use a theological expression — by “special revelation.” His dealings with his people, Israel, beginning with Abraham on, of course, to culmination in Jesus Christ, and especially as God has revealed himself in Christ.

### **Question 5:**

#### **Do people of other religions actually worship the same God that Christians worship?**

**It's obvious that countless people around the world reject Christ and his teachings about God, and instead embrace other religions. But how far does their rejection really go? Some Christians say that many different religions throughout the world actually worship the true God of Scripture. It's just that they do it under different names and in different ways. But is this really true? Do people of other religions actually worship the same God that Christians worship?**

#### **Dr. Stephen Wellum**

One of the key areas that we wrestle with today is a world of religious pluralism. And we are faced on every hand with people that try to say that our Christian view of God is very similar to other, particularly monotheistic, conceptions. Islam is often the one that comes to the forefront of discussion. We must be very clear as Christians that who we say God is, is not the same as what Islam means by when they speak of Allah and how they understand who God is. It's important to realize that Islam post-dates Christianity. Islam is that which cannot exist apart from, we like to say, the borrowed capital of Christianity. It builds off of the fact that Muhammad thinks that God has revealed himself to Old Testament prophets, to Jesus as a prophet, and then himself as the last and final prophet. And Islam, in their presentation of God, has certain similarities to Christianity: one god, one creator, one lord, a judge, the one who rules over history. But beyond that, it denies the doctrine of the Trinity, it denies — tied to the doctrine of the Trinity — the deity of Christ, the deity of the Holy Spirit, in being Unitarian and not Trinitarian. The personal emphasis, that God is personal — the tri-personal — is lost. And so, in Islam, there is a strong emphasis on what we call the “Creator-creature distinction.” He is transcendent, distinct, separate from this world, but almost deistic, so separate that he is almost not involved in this world; he doesn't enter into covenant relationship; there's no notion of that in Islam; there's no notion of God who makes promises — the promise maker, the promise keeper. And I think it's tied back to the fact that they deny the doctrine of the Trinity; they deny the great

truths of the Old and New Testament. So, to say that Islam has a similar view of God — as popular as that is in our day — is just inaccurate from a Christian viewpoint, and indeed from a Muslim viewpoint as well. And it's important to show the differences. It's important to show that the Christian view of God is utterly unique, that there is only one God, one Lord, one Savior. And the Muslim view is — as much as it borrows from Christianity — is a distortion of it. And it needs to be seen as such, and the Muslim people need to hear the good news of who the true and living God is.

**Dr. Stephen Blakemore**

When you think about the nature of Christianity in comparison to a great religion such as Islam, one of the questions that people often ask is whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Or people might want to ask, "Does Islam contradict the teachings of the Bible about God?" Well, that's a very complicated subject to deal with historically, of course, since I think it can be proven that Mohammed was greatly influenced both by Judaism and Christianity. However, the vision of God that one finds in Islam, is decidedly different than the vision of God that one has in Christian faith. For instance, we believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Well, for the Muslim that is absolute blasphemy. Almighty Allah, who is utterly transcendent and beyond all things, not only could not manifest himself in the world through an incarnation, but he would not deign to do so. It would be beneath his dignity. And therefore that is a very different understanding of not only the nature of God's relationship to creation, but it is also a statement about how Islam understands the character of God's love for creation. Christianity, on the other hand, believes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" — the logos who was God and was with God, as the first chapter of the Gospel of John says, to the world for salvation. Therefore, yes, there's a great contradiction in that sense.

Now, the incarnation of Jesus Christ also means that we have a different understanding about the essence of God. Christians say God is three persons — one God, three persons — a great mystery, not a mathematical problem, a mystery to be adored, to be contemplated, and to be worshipped. That is who God is. But for Islam, you don't have a view of God as three persons. You have Allah: one mind, one will, one sovereign power at work. Whereas in the doctrine of the Trinity, we're able to say, "God is a fellowship of love." The Father, the Son, the Spirit eternally love one another. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit eternally honor one another. That changes the whole context of our discussion about who God is and what God is like. And in the final analysis, we could say this: Islam also, since it doesn't begin with the essence of God as love, has no possible way of talking about why God would love the world. So Islam has an almighty creator and a sovereign lord over the affairs of man, but there is no loving Father. There is no God who gives himself for the sake of his broken creation. And those are two very different visions of God.



**Question 6:****What are some of the common ways the doctrine of the Trinity has been misunderstood?**

Our theology about God doesn't have to be perfect in order for us to be Christians. We might even go so far as to say that all true believers have at least some mistaken beliefs about God. But when those mistaken beliefs touch on the heart of God's proclamation about himself, they can be sufficient to place those beliefs outside the bounds of Christianity. One doctrine that has often been the center of controversy is the Trinity. In general, Christians are quick to say that we believe in the Trinity. But we often disagree when it comes to defining and explaining it. And non-Christians frequently misunderstand this doctrine, too. So, what mistakes do we tend to make? What are some of the common ways the doctrine of the Trinity has been misunderstood?

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Christians have always believed that one God has eternally existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are two ways to get that wrong. One is to think that God is so "one" that we don't have distinct persons anymore, which is called "modalism." Another way to get that wrong is to so emphasize the distinction of the persons that you end up really with three gods. And Christians believe neither in Tritheism or modalism. Christians believe this one God has eternally existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**Dr. Keith Johnson**

Christians are sometimes accused of worshiping three gods. Muslims frequently raise this objection. It's important to recognize that this criticism arises from a misunderstanding of what Christians actually believe. The Bible doesn't teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three gods. On the contrary, the Scriptures clearly teach that there is one God and that this one God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the first Christians were Jews who inherited from the Old Testament a conviction that God is one. This conviction is clearly expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." How then should we think about Father, Son and Holy Spirit? As these early Christians read their Bibles, they recognized that they needed to provide account for several kinds of data they found in Scripture. First, there are some Scriptures that clearly affirm that God is one, like Deuteronomy 6:4. Second, there are Scriptures that teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each God. One example would be John 1:1 that affirms that the Son is God. Third, there are Scriptures that teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in some way distinct. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. John 1:1 affirms this distinction when it says that "the Word was with God." Finally, there are Scriptures that teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit share one nature and act with one will. In John 10:30, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." Thus, Christian doctrine of the Trinity attempts to account for these Scriptures by affirming that one God — eternally exists in a unity of being — is three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Central to the doctrine of the Trinity is the distinction between person and

essence. God is one with respect to essence and three with respect to person. In fact we might say that with God, there is one “what” and three “whos”. If Christians said that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three essences, they would be worshiping three gods. The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity however, affirms that God has one essence or nature. How can one God eternally exist in a unity of being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Ultimately, this is a mystery. Christians, however, do not worship three gods.

### **Question 7:**

#### **Does the Father’s authority mean that he forces his will on the Son and the Holy Spirit?**

**Because the doctrine of the Trinity is mysterious, it sometimes causes unbelievers, and even some Christians, to be confused about how the persons of the Trinity relate to each other. For instance, it’s clear in many parts of Scripture that the Father has authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that sometimes there have been disagreements among the persons of the Trinity? And does the Father’s authority mean that he forces his will on the Son and the Holy Spirit?**

#### **Dr. Mark Strauss**

We sometimes talk about the Father’s authority over the Son and whether he always gets his way in terms of that authority. I think when we try to impose the idea of human authority on the trinity it just doesn’t work. Because simply, the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, never disagree with each other. They are all in perfect unity. So the idea that one is telling the other what to do just doesn’t make sense.

#### **Dr. Glen Scorgie**

We understand that in groups there are differences of opinion at the human level, and, on occasion, like in the military or in an important decision making situation, somebody has to be the final authority. That’s usually the way it works, and so we are tempted to think that’s the way it is with God. And here’s Jesus in the Garden saying, “Not my will but yours be done Father.” So, it might look as though there is a disagreement of wills within the Trinity. But it’s so helpful to understand that the difference in relative authority between the Father and the Son is not the way it was and is in eternity, but that this differential of authority and deference toward the authority of the Father in the case of Gethsemane is a function of Christ’s assumption of our humanity. When he says, “Not my will but thine be done,” he is surrendering his human, fearful, relatively weak, relatively less informed will to that of the Father. But when we think of the eternal Trinity, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the only way there would ever... There couldn’t be a difference of opinion because each is infinite and infinitely equal in love and intelligence and motivation. There is no conflict of wills. How could there be? There is no compromise of the ultimate perfection of each one. They are in absolute harmony as, indeed, I think even Jesus was at that level where he says, my food, the thing that sustains me, is to do the will of the Father —

not as an alien will to which I submit, but something that expresses the deepest desires of my heart as well. And so in the dynamics of mutual perfection and love and glory, there is no need for a hierarchy of decision-making, because there is no gradation of competency to make decisions. It's a beautiful mutuality of three persons of absolute perfection.

**Dr. Stephen Blakemore**

Well often when people discuss the nature of the Trinity and the nature of the relationships that exist between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we often will point to Jesus' statements that he came to do the will of the Father and that the Father is the Father and he is the Son, and he is the Son from the Father. And, therefore, we often tend to think about the relationships of God within the Godhead — amongst the persons of the Trinity — as though we're talking about some sort of power hierarchy. I think that's fundamentally the wrong way for us to think about the nature of the Trinity. God the Father and God the Son apparently, according to Jesus' prayer in John 17, shared a glory together. Jesus calls upon the Father to say, "Father, I want you to glorify me now as I have glorified you." There is some sort of mutuality that exists between the persons of the Godhead. Now, having said that, the Father is still, as the ancient theologians of the church said, the fountainhead of all divinity. And therefore the Father's priority and precedence is significant. Paul says about Jesus, that at the end of all things, the Son will present all the kingdoms of the earth to his Father, that the Son came to make us children of the Father. But the Father came to bear, sent his Son to exalt the name of his Son, and give him a name, which is above every name. Even when you think about the Holy Spirit, it's telling to me that Jesus would say to his disciples, "If you sin against the Father it can be forgiven. If you sin against the Son it can be forgiven. But if you sin against the Holy Spirit, it cannot be forgiven." So there is some sort of true and deep mutuality, which does not do away with the distinctions or the notion of the Father's authority. But we could say it, perhaps finally, wrap it up in this sense: The Father's authority is always an authority of love. The Father's authority is an authority that loves the Son, desires the Son to be glorified, just as the Son then desires the Father to be glorified. And finally, if they share a heart of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the idea that there would be a disagreement of wills between the Father, Son, and Spirit becomes kind of comical in one sense because if the Son eternally and the Spirit eternally long to do the will of the Father, and the Father eternally longs to glorify and honor the Son and the Spirit, then essentially, in the life of God there is unanimity of will, a unanimity of love, because a unanimity of being in this fellowship of the Trinity.

**Question 8:**

**In what ways is God similar to and different from our earthly, human fathers?**

**In addition to having implications for our doctrine of the Trinity, God's fatherhood also has important things to teach us about our relationship with God. The Bible teaches that God is the Father of believers in ways that are similar to earthly**

**fathers. But our concepts of human fatherhood have changed throughout history, and we all have very different experiences of earthly fathers. So, in what ways is God similar to and different from our earthly, human fathers?**

**Dr. Jonathan Pennington**

And it is important that we understand what our own culture thinks about what a father is so that we don't necessarily confuse it with what the biblical notion of God as Father is. In modern western culture, for example, a father, that image is usually one of personal intimacy, and maybe the idea of a papa that one might climb up on his lap. In other cultures, the emphasis of what a father is is different. In ancient near eastern culture, such as the time of the Bible and the first century Christianity, the idea of fatherhood was primarily one of protection and provision and one of identity. One's own identity was found by what one's father did at the basic level of occupation, but also one's honor in society, one's role and status in society, was a function of one's own family relationships headed by the father. And so, for Jesus to emphasize — and you see the rest of the New Testament unpack this as well — that God is our Father is language, yes, of “familiality,” that God — we are part of his family, his children — and that God does love us intimately, that is true, but more weighty and more central to the idea of God as Father is that our identity, our very nature, our understanding of who we are as people is now wrapped up in God as revealed through Christ Jesus. Our identity is one of God's. Our nature even is one that comes from God, not from whatever our past is, so that the Corinthian prostitute and the godly Jewish rabbi are now in Christ as one identity because they are called into this one God, and by this one God, who is now called our Father.

**Question 9:**

**What are some practical applications that human fathers can draw from God's fatherhood?**

**In the Scriptures, God's identity as Father is often raised as a model for what human fathers should be and do. What are some practical applications that human fathers can draw from God's fatherhood?**

**Dr. Robert Lister**

I take it that God's fatherhood has a special responsibility as well as privileges that go with that for human fathers. I take it that because of the eternal fatherhood of God, and the eternal sonship of Jesus that the pattern of influence is from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. In other words, human fatherhood is to mirror and be judged by the standard of God's fatherhood and not the other way around. Which means that those who are, or would be at some point in the future, human fathers, have a remarkable responsibility to bear that name by analogy, and with imperfection to be sure, in a way that their children can look at their daddy's fatherhood and say of God's fatherhood, when they're able to connect the dots in Scripture, that it's good news for God to be a father to me because my dad, however imperfect he was, he loved me, he cared for me, he sacrificed for me, he gave himself for me, he served me

with his, not with perfection but with his all, and can say that that is an indication of the goodness of God's fatherhood. So, I take it that those of us who are fathers have the capacity to wreck for our children the name "father" and raise obstacles to their coming to love God's fatherhood, and thereby to love the gospel. Or, by God's grace, have the capacity to put a connection into the fabric of their own relationships — these most close family relationships — whereby they will one day say, "That's good news. I identify with that. God is a father to me." And that is a part of the gospel.

### **Question 10:**

#### **How can we encourage Christians that have had poor fathers to view God's fatherhood in a positive light?**

**There are many valuable insights human fathers can learn about their roles by observing God's character and actions as Father. But the sad truth is that no human father can ever be perfect like God is, and some of them are actually terribly unloving and even abusive. Not surprisingly, this sometimes causes their children to recoil from the idea that God is the Father of believers. So, how can the church deal with this? How can we encourage Christians that have had poor fathers to view God's fatherhood in a positive light?**

#### **Dr. Peter Walker**

I think the idea that God is our Father is one of the most powerful things in pastoral work. When I was in parish ministry, people would come through my door, and I'd almost think, here goes yet another person, someone who's going to come and they're going to say, "I've got a problem understanding how God is my Father." And I can see it in so many people. The New Testament is full of this rich idea of God as Father. Ephesians 3 talks about God being the Father from whom every family is named. And in John 14, there's one of the most important prayers I think of the New Testament, where someone says to Jesus, "Show us the Father." I think that's something which we can echo in our own hearts — "Show us the Father." That's what we need to see, each one of us. And the glorious message of the New Testament is precisely that God is this gracious warm-hearted Father. And I think many people find that difficult because they come from family backgrounds, perhaps, where they have a distorted view of Fatherhood. It's authoritarian; it's repressive in some kind of way, perhaps even abusive. And that's really a very difficult thing for people to come to terms with. In the contrast with that, the New Testament gives us this great view of God as Father, and if people can walk into that, and God can reveal his Fatherhood to them then that's a way to pastoral wholeness, personal wholeness, and to walking in freedom of life.

#### **Dr. Rebecca Luman**

The aspects of God's Fatherhood that we can and should emphasize, beyond fatherhood as power and authority, is fatherhood as unconditional love, fatherhood as active protection, fatherhood as vigilant provision. And these have wonderful teaching aspects for how fathers should be in their families. But I think a caution we

need to observe is that we should be careful not to project normal fatherhood back onto the fatherhood of God. But instead, let the fatherhood of people, our human fatherhood, be defined by the fatherhood of God. I say this because many people throughout history, Martin Luther for one, were very much afraid of God, because they pictured him in terms of their earthly father and, therefore, thought him rigid, harsh, abusive. And today, and of course just obviously we ought to think of the fatherhood of God as defined by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And as we look back from Jesus into the fatherhood of God we have a fatherhood that's tender and protective as well as strong and defensive. And so, many women I talk to, women students who have been abused — a surprising number of women who come here for training for ministry have been abused, and therefore stand back somewhat of the idea of the fatherhood of God but as we talk of who Jesus was, and Jesus shows us who the Father is, then that aspect of fatherhood redeems a destructive thought or a destructive concept of the fatherhood of God.

### **Dr. David Bauer**

The issue of the relationship between God as Father and human fathers is very important in our culture, especially because we of course so often experience in the brokenness of — especially modern American families — father models who are problematic. And many people, as a matter of fact, will actually say that, “I don't like to talk about God as Father or think about God as Father because my own relationship with my father was so hurtful, so damaging, and that will actually bring in unhealthy sorts of images or constructions of how I think about God.” It seems to me, though, that we have to consider that the Bible, of course, acknowledges the fallenness of the human family and of human relationships and acknowledges all of that. The way in which the Bible handles this is quite the opposite. It is not a matter of “God as Father” meaning that I take my relationship with my own father, as broken and as hurtful and unhealthy as it might have been, and somehow project that back upon God. But rather, it's the other way around. And that is that God as Father becomes a paradigm, a model, for how we ought to order our relationships, how we ought to order our families, and the like. And actually, I do believe that pastorally, people can experience healing from the damage that they've experienced in broken relationships with their own fathers as they actually live into the biblical understanding of God as Father and God being our Father.

### **Question 11:**

**What kinds of implications does God's fatherhood have for pastoral ministry?**

**God's role as Father can also have important implications for the ways many different kinds of leaders treat those under their authority. This should be particularly true in the church, which the Bible calls God's family. In fact, in some theological traditions, pastors are actually referred to by the title “Father.” What kinds of implications does God's fatherhood have for pastoral ministry?**



**Dr. Dennis Johnson**

I think for pastors it's crucial to see that as Scripture speaks of God as Father to his children in particular — not uniquely to Christ the eternal Son, but to us as children by adoption through his grace in Christ — the emphasis is on the Father's compassion, on the Father's loving discipline, and on the Father's wisdom. In compassion, I think of Psalm 103, which speaks of the fact that as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. Not every father is always compassionate when we think of human fathers, but that is the model that, as human fathers, we are to look to, to understand our children and to be patient with them in their weakness. And certainly if we are thinking about pastors reflecting in some respect the fatherly care of God the Father for his children in the church, pastors need to come to members of the congregation with a gentle compassion, with an empathy, with an understanding of their weakness. Now, that doesn't mean that pastors are just supposed to hold hands and make everybody feel good, because another crucial dimension of a father's care — that is, when a father's caring for his children as the Father, God the Father, cares for us — is loving discipline. I think of Hebrews 12, for example, where the writer to the Hebrews, quoting from Proverbs 3, calls us to be patient in enduring the discipline of the Lord and then really unpacks that analogy, talks about the way that our human fathers disciplined us by their best lights, didn't always know fully how to do it, but they did their best, for a time. But our heavenly Father always is disciplining us for our good, and that, though discipline in the present may be painful, afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

So again, thinking about pastor's roles — surrogates for the Father — in caring for the members of the congregation, compassion absolutely, but not a compassion that leaves people where they are. The Father loves us too much to leave us in our childish selfishness. It's a discipline. It's a calling of us to live out the life of faith and to grow in our faith. And, of course, the Bible also speaks of fathers as having wisdom. Proverbs, of course, constantly is calling the son to listen to the wisdom of the father. And pastors need a lot of wisdom to help God's people to understand how to apply the word in the particular issues that we face in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. And so, we should be seeking wisdom and seeking to help God's people grow in wisdom and knowing how to apply the principles of the Word to the particulars of their own situation, whether it's suffering, or whether it's a decision about the future, or whether it's dealing with sin in their lives. They need wisdom. And the Father provides that wisdom in the Word and then brings that wisdom, we pray, through us as pastors to God's people.

**Question 12:**

**How can we be sure that God's purposes for us will actually be fulfilled?**

**God's fatherly care and provision are sources of tremendous confidence for Christians. They remind us that God loves us, and always has our best interests at**

**heart. But how can we be sure that God's good purposes for us will actually be fulfilled?**

**Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III**

I think that the Christian's confidence in God is enormously helped by understanding what the Bible teaches about God's all-powerfulness and his unchangeability. There are many today who say that they want a deity that faces the same kinds of risks and possibilities that we face as human beings. Because we as human beings face things coming around the corner that we don't know are coming, and aren't prepared for, and are caught surprised by, and they want a deity who's caught by surprise just like we are, and at risk just like we are, and faced with possibilities just like we are, or else how can that God really help us? Well, I think that that thinking is exactly upside-down. If that's the kind of deity that exists — a God who doesn't know what's coming, a God whose mind changes all the time, his strategies change all the time, and that he doesn't have the power within himself, or he's not willing to exercise the power that does reside within himself in order to address a particular situation — well then, that deity is not going to be very helpful when I come into the crises of my life. And I think the Christian doctrine of the all-powerfulness of God and the unchangeableness of God tells me two things. One, that there is never a circumstance in my life to which God is not only equal but superior. That is there is no problem that I can face that is larger than the truth of my God, there is no mountain that is not a molehill in comparison with the power of my God, and that I can expect the way that God will address that situation will not change from day to day. I can depend upon him to act in a certain way.

**Dr. Samuel Ling**

God wants his children to completely trust in him as an all-powerful God, and yet a God who never changes. The Bible clearly teaches us that God doesn't change in his character. He never changes in his holiness and justice. God never changes in his promises that he has made to us in the Bible, in the relationship he has established with us, called a "covenant." God never changes his person. Jesus Christ never changes. And his standards and expectations for us never change. This means that when we pray, and we put our trust in God and commit a certain thing in our lives to God, then we can know that God doesn't change. Now, we change; we are prone to leave the Lord that we love and go away and commit some sin. But God never changes. And so the relationship between God and his children, the relationship between you and Jesus Christ, is a relationship between an unchanging God and human beings who are fleeting and change and wander all the time. And yet, God is powerful enough to preserve this relationship that he has established between him and you. His unchanging grace and justice provided for us by Lord Jesus Christ guarantees that your relationship with Jesus Christ is secure and yet never compromises his standards.

**Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**

You know the Lord himself tells us that our confidence in his character is rooted in the fact that he doesn't change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There is



no shadow of turning in him — as he says. And why is that so important? Today we can trust that he is just and merciful and righteous and gracious. What if tomorrow we were to understand that he is vengeful and unforgiving? We'll this would not be the God we know in the Bible. It's so important that we know that he doesn't change. If he did change, if he was subject to change, he wouldn't be God. Why is it so important that we understand that he is omnipotent? Well first of all, if God is anything less than omnipotent then he's something less than the full perfection that we know him to be. For as God is the one who is powerful, he is not only powerful, he is all-powerful. Now, that is also the root of our assurance, because how do we know that he actually accomplishes his purposes? The Bible gives us all kinds of promises — a new heaven and a new earth, a perfect consummation to history, the creation of a people saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, kept to the power of God to the end. We are told about promises in eternity. It takes an omnipotent God to be able to fulfill those promises. And of this we are sure: he is able. You know, the best testimony in the Bible sometimes comes from people who are surprised when they discover just who the real God is. In Daniel 4, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, learns about the omnipotence of God. And when he finds out who really is God he says, "No one can stay his hand. He is the one true omnipotent God."

### **Question 13:**

#### **How can an unchangeable God change his mind?**

**God's "unchangeableness" or "immutability" should be a great source of confidence for all believers. But sometimes the Scriptures say that God regretted what he had done. Sometimes they even say that he changed his mind. How can both of these teachings be true? How can an unchangeable God change his mind?**

#### **Dr. John Frame**

God rules the earth by an eternal decree that he has devised before the creation, going back into eternity past, timelessly, and so everything that happens is something that God has planned for eternity. But the other side of that truth is that God enters into history. He enters into transactions with people. He talks with people. He acts in history. And most important for us, he redeems human beings from sin by sending his Son to die on the cross. So, God, as he enters into history, he takes a changing role in history. He does one thing on Monday; he does another thing on Tuesday. He is angry with somebody on Monday, pleased with that person on Tuesday. And as we look at that, it certainly looks like change. Our words fail us sometimes in knowing what to say, but we look at that and we say, yes, God has shown mercy. God has restrained his wrath. God has told us that we were under judgment and yet he has brought repentance on us, and so now he's going to be merciful to us. We can get into difficulties in language and knowing how to describe that. It's certainly tempting to say that God changes at those points, but that would mislead people perhaps into forgetting about the eternal decree which never changes. So as long as you know what the facts are, you can speak of this in various ways. But God's eternal decree

never changes. His relationships to human beings in history do change, but those changes are eternally preordained.

### **Question 14:**

#### **What is the ultimate goal of humanity's redemption?**

**Because God is both omnipotent and immutable, the redemption he has promised us will certainly come to pass. But as wonderful as our redemption is, is it the ultimate goal of human history? Or is it part of something even bigger? What is the ultimate goal of humanity's redemption?**

#### **Dr. Thomas Nettles**

We learn that God is working in his triune being for the salvation of sinners, but then we learn also in Scripture that he has done this in such a way as to display his glory. So I think that the triune God, because of the working for our redemption in eternity, will receive glory. God has done this for his glory, to manifest not only his justice and his righteousness and the immutability and perfect holiness of his law, but to show that he is wise. And he can maintain all of those attributes about himself, and yet be merciful and be forgiving and justify sinners. The prophet asked, "Who is a pardoning God like thee and who has grace like this?" So it is for the glory of God. It is for the salvation of sinners, but the ultimate result of this and the intended result of it is that God's glory might be manifest in ever increasing measures throughout all eternity.

### **Question 15:**

#### **What are the main Evangelical interpretations of the days of creation in Genesis chapter 1?**

**One very important way God is glorified is through his works of creation. The Bible makes it clear that God created all things. But Evangelical Christians sometimes interpret the creation accounts in different ways, especially when it comes to things like the days of creation. Which types of interpretations are acceptable? And what are the main Evangelical interpretations of the days of creation in Genesis chapter 1?**

#### **Dr. Mark Strauss**

There are various different interpretations of the days of creation in Genesis 1. I think there are basically three different views. One view would see the days as very short periods. We could say 24-hour days. Of course, the sun and the moon weren't created until the fourth day, so it's hard to refer to 24-hour days, but days in what people would say is the natural, normal sense of today — so six or seven periods in that sense. The second perspective could be called a "day-age theory" or a "day-age view," in the sense that the days were long periods or geological ages, and that God was gradually creating through natural processes that took billions of years —

certainly millions, probably billions of years. The third view is that, really, Genesis 1 is a poetic description of creation and that the days are meant to symbolize, in some sense, the nature or manner in which God created, in which he first of all formed things and then he filled those things he had formed with his creation. So, those are the three main interpretations of the days of Genesis 1.

**Dr. David Bauer**

On the one hand, of course, you have evangelicals who want to adopt a literal — one might say — a literal reading of the seven days. So, they talk about seven literal days and the like. Sometimes this is even understood as seven literal 24-hour days and this kind of thing. The alternative is obvious, and that is a figurative way of talking, and that the writer of Genesis did not intend to say that the world was created in seven days, or maybe not even in the order — if one talks about days in terms of epochs or ages — in the order in which they are presented. Many evangelicals have problems with the seven literal days of creation in Genesis 1 for two or three reasons. For one thing, actually, you do not have just one creation account at the beginning of Genesis, but two, as I think almost everyone would recognize. The first creation account there in Genesis 1, extending into the very beginning of chapter 2, and then the second account of creation from about 2:4, 2:5 to the end of chapter 3. And there are some differences, many evangelicals would say, between them, as they read the passage, Genesis 1-3, itself. For example, although Genesis 1:1 and following up through the beginning of chapter 2, talks about seven days of creation, the second account there talks about one day of creation on the day when Lord God made the heavens and the earth. So, actually, you don't have just in Genesis talk of seven days of creation, you also have an account of creation, which takes place on one day. Of course, there are differences in order as well between the two accounts. In the first account of creation, humans are created after the animals; whereas, in the second account of creation, humans are created before the animals, this kind of thing.

Beyond that, in Genesis 1, there seems to be a kind of symmetry. So that, in other words, the first three days actually correspond to the second set of three days, with the seventh day of creation being, of course, at the end. I might say, incidentally, in Jewish thought — and you find this actually suggested, alluded to implicitly and assumed in Hebrews 4 — the seventh day was not considered to have ended at all. The seventh day of creation was, by the Jews, and apparently the Jewish Christians also, was considered to extend as long as creation itself understood to be coterminous with creation itself. That's why Hebrews 4 can talk about entering God's rest while the promise of entering his rest remains and while there remains a Sabbath rest — that God's rest of the seventh day continues as long as creation does. So, certainly, you do not have this even in Jewish thinking, the seventh day being a closed day of creation.

**Question 16:****How can people with the same basic commitments to the authority and infallibility of Scripture read Genesis chapter 1 in such different ways?**

**This disagreement over the days of creation can be confusing not just because the views are so different, but also for a more fundamental reason. How can people with the same basic commitments to the authority and infallibility of Scripture read Genesis 1 in such different ways?**

**Dr. John Oswalt**

Certainly the issue of the days of creation in Genesis 1 is a hot one that has been the source of a lot of arguments. I think one of the issues is what kind of literature is this? Is this literature which is designed to give sensuous fact — facts relating to the senses — or is it literature designed to teach a spiritual fact? Now, we shouldn't drive a wedge between those two. God's the creator of this world and they should fit together. But if we read Genesis 1 as a science text that will lead us to a different interpretation than if we read it as a discussion of the meaning and nature of creation. So, typically, the Protestant Church has tended to read it as a science text, and this has gotten us into a lot of difficulties because if you take Bishop Ussher's dating from the seventeen hundreds, you simply add up the figures of the Bible, and we know that the world was created on October 12th, 4004 BC. Well, that has run us into a lot of difficulties with people who have indeed attempted to read the text of nature from a scientific point of view. And the history of the Church on these kinds of issues has not been very encouraging. We have said the world is flat. Anybody who says it's round doesn't believe the Bible, because the Bible says the winds come from the four corners of the earth. Well, you and I will say, oh, that's poetry. Yes, but those people, five and six hundred years ago, didn't read it as poetry. They read it as science. In the same way, clearly, the sun revolves around the earth. Joshua doesn't say that the earth stood still, it says the sun stood still. Again, we can say, oh, yes, that's simply looking at the data from our perspective; it looks as though the sun is moving but we have other reasons to say no.

Well, I think the same is true with regards to Genesis 1. Obviously, you have the possibility that it is literal, twenty-four hour days, seven of them, that's that. But you also have the possibility that God is trying to make a larger point. And I want to be very careful here. There are those who would say, "Oh well, it's a theological statement; therefore, none of this factual basis really matters. It's just a parable like Jesus told parables." I think there's a problem with that. The problem being that throughout the Old Testament, revelation comes to us in space and time. And so, our default position ought to be that this material is indeed based in actual historic fact. And so I think the reference to the seven days is God's way of saying creation took place in time, not in "Never-never-land" as the myths would say. The myths would say, creation is continually occurring in the invisible realm, and we've got to try to plug our world into that. The Bible is saying, not at all. Creation occurred in time. I think the same thing is going on then in Genesis 2 with the attempt to locate Eden. It took place in our space. So, you have the position that the information is literal. You

have the opposing position that it is merely a parable teaching theological truth. In between those two is, yes, God did create this world in time and space, he created it in that order, moving from the creation of heaven and earth to the creation of humanity. And so you have, I think, those three approaches — it's literal; it has no basis in fact whatsoever; and between those, it is a poetic account of historic activity.

### **Question 17:**

### **What practical implications can we draw from the fact that the creation reflects God's goodness?**

As much as Christians might disagree about the meaning of the word “day” in Genesis 1, we should all be in full agreement that the creation God made is good. On each of the first five days of creation, God looked at what he had made and saw that it was good. And on the sixth day he looked at everything he had made and concluded that it was very good. After all, how could a perfectly good God create anything other than a good universe? But while all Christians should be able to affirm the basic fact of creation's goodness, it's not always clear to us how we should respond to that fact. So, what practical implications can we draw from the fact that the creation reflects God's goodness?

#### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

There are very practical implications from our belief that the creation reflects God's goodness. I mean, not least in the fact that God is to be relied upon and trusted. God brings about the seasons, the rain, the refreshment of the earth. And I think also it means that we can be confident that God is to be trusted, and so, when we go into all the world to tell them about Jesus Christ, then we can know that actually God is as good as his Word. He upholds his Word, and we can indeed, with confidence, tell them Jesus will save those who believe in him. And also, we should have a degree of respect and care for God's world because God made it, and God expects us to treat it well. We should care about the environment. We should celebrate the use of the world and all its resources in such a way that glorify God, so that people can see that there is a good God behind it and that the Maker continues to look after his creation.

#### **Dr. K Erik Thoennes**

One of the most important things Christians believe about creation is that it's created by God who's wise and good and declared creation very good. And even though we recognize a fallenness to creation — that everything's been distorted and perverted because of human rebellion against the Creator — we still, nevertheless, recognize an enduring, very goodness in creation that should have a pervasive effect on how we view everything in life, including eating and drinking and the pleasures of the world that God has given us. So, we have a positive view of the world around us that gives us a reason to study the liberal arts and to enjoy a good cup of coffee.

**Dr. Stephen Wellum**

As we look at the creation account, what's staggering, that we notice before sin enters the world, is this constant affirmation that after each day it is pronounced as "good". After the sixth day it is pronounced as "very good," so that we can say that the entire created order reflects nothing less than God's goodness and his creation and who he is in that way. Those have very practical implications for us. The doctrine of creation, and particularly the affirmation that it's good, reminds us that this world that he has made is that which we should enjoy, that which we shouldn't treat as sort of second class. Sometimes, in the history of the church, unfortunately as it tied itself to some Greek thought, particularly some Platonic thought often emphasized the spiritual realm as being higher or better than the physical realm. This showed up in early church heresies — Gnosticism, Docetism — that was ultimately a Christological heresy that affirmed that Christ only appeared to be a man because you couldn't have God the Son taking upon a human nature, human flesh, because it was inferior.

You go back to the doctrine of creation. God in making it good — reflecting his goodness — means that this whole world material, as well as spiritual, is that which God has made; it is that which reflects who he is. Yes, sin has distorted it; it's distorted both the physical and the spiritual. It will be redeemed. And, in fact, our redemption is not just a spiritual redemption; it is a physical redemption as well, so that we will have glorified bodies, patterned after Christ. We will have a new heavens and a new earth. Not a new heavens and new earth that means that we'll be up on clouds in terms of that kind of spiritual notion of heaven but a whole new universe that reflects the original purpose of creation as being good, reflecting God's purposes and plan, so that all of this means that we are to enjoy this world. We are to care for this world. We are to be stewards of it, even in spite of the Fall. And we look forward to the future when Christ comes again and we live in a new heaven, new earth, new creation, as the Scripture speaks of it, and enjoy all of its resources, I'm convinced, carry out a science, do so for God's glory, work — not something that is certainly affected by the Fall, but part of the original world. So that we will do all of that as God originally made us for his glory. All of that is some of the practical implications of viewing creation as created by God as good.

**Question 18:**

**How should Christians feel about the fact that God has ultimate authority over everything?**

**One of the implications of the fact that God created the universe is that he has continuing authority over it. In fact, he has unlimited and final authority over everything he has made — over everything that exists. Admittedly, this can be an unsettling thought because so many terrible things happen in the world. Should God's authority and power frighten us? Should they comfort us? Should they anger us? And how should Christians feel about the fact that God has ultimate authority over everything?**

**Dr. Dennis Johnson**

I think when some people hear that the Bible teaches that God has ultimate authority over everything that happens in the world, they feel maybe threatened by that; they feel resentful. But Christians, really when we think about who God is, should feel incredibly thankful. It means that our lives are in the hands of an all-wise, all-mighty, all-loving Father who has given his own Son for us on the cross. And that is such incredible, incredible comfort in times of suffering in particular, in times of when we wonder what is happening in our lives. Consider the alternatives. What if what happens in our lives, and everything that happens with history, were not in the control of a personal, just, merciful, loving, wise God? Of course, many people in the world think that it's not in anybody's control — that it's random, chaotic, perhaps driven by impersonal, naturalistic forces. That gives no hope. That gives no reason for comfort. That certainly gives no meaning to suffering. If it were true, we'd have to live with it. But happily it's not true. Or consider the view that history and our own experience, everything that happens is in the hand of an unpredictable tyrant, and we never can guess what he's going to do next or what he expects or what he demands. That would be terrifying. Or even consider if everything were in the control of a deity who was just, but who has no mercy whatsoever, who would deal with us fairly in terms of our behavior, but from whom we could never expect any forgiveness, any kindness, if we failed to hit the mark, if we missed the mark, as we all do. Again, that would be a very bleak prospect. We couldn't complain that we were getting injustice, but at the same time there would be no hope.

But we actually live in the universe that is ruled by a personal, sovereign God who is never unjust, but who is better than just in Christ. He satisfies his justice, his just indictment against us through the death of his own beloved Son and grants to us grace. And we can have assurance that he has control of all the details of our lives, so that when we are going through suffering, intense suffering, and we don't understand the reason for it, we don't despair. We have reason to hope that it is meaningful, that it is part of his good plan to conform us to the image of his Son, as Paul says in Romans 8, no matter what happens, that is the plan that he is working out and will accomplish. And that we can have that assurance that suffering is not only meaningful, but it is ultimately temporary. That the day is coming that God will wipe every tear away from the eyes of those whom he's given to Jesus and who now have entrusted our lives to Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit. That that day is coming when all the things that confuse us and distress us and cause us such pain will come to a close. And not just in a cessation, but in a crescendo of joy being replaced by the joy of celebrating Christ's victory with him forever.

**Dr. Thomas Schreiner**

I think the Bible is very clear that God is sovereign over all that occurs. That he is the Lord. The Bible says that God moves the king's heart in whichever way he wishes. I think at the end of the day virtually all Christians agree that there's a mystery there. God is sovereign over all that occurs, but human evil is real; it is not a charade. Human beings are not puppets at the end of the day. So we're not minimizing human evil and saying that God is sovereign, because people find it very disturbing that God



rules over all things, and then to think of the horrific things that occur in life. But we rely on the Scriptures themselves for our understanding of reality, and the Scriptures tell us the Judge of all the earth always does right, that God does not sin; that God does not tempt people to sin. So those are some false paths that we need to watch out for when we speak of God being sovereign over all things. That doesn't mean that God tempts us to sin. That doesn't mean that God is the author of evil. That doesn't mean that God himself is evil in any way.

If someone were to say, well, I don't fully comprehend it. My response would be, well, I don't think anyone fully comprehends how all of these things can be so. I would actually argue that God being sovereign over all things is actually a great comfort. The world is not spinning out of his control. Even if we don't understand all things that are happening, if you belong to Jesus Christ, God is your Father and he loves you. And he loves you and he's protecting you no matter what you're going through. And some things we go through in this life are incredibly painful. But no matter what you're going through, he is in control. He has even — can you accept this at this point in your life — for your good, for your sanctification. God turns the enemies in our lives; he turns them into our friends, so that we more than conquer through him who loved us. We don't just conquer; it says that we more than conquer through Christ who loved us. So God takes the trials and difficulties, and he uses them to sanctify us, to make us more like Jesus Christ. He brings the things that he brings into our lives so that we will be like Christ. Hebrews 12, he disciplines us as a kind and wise and good Father. I think the fight of faith is often fought at exactly this point. We have to say to ourselves over and over again, God cares for me, and even if I don't understand it, he is bringing this into my life for my good, for my holiness, for my sanctification. He is the king of the universe. The alternative vision, I think, is actually quite discouraging. The things that come into our life, God is up in heaven saying, I wish I could help you but there is nothing I can do. These events that are striking you are beyond my control. We are then at the whim of other human beings and demons and impersonal forces. I don't think that's comforting at all.

### **Dr. Derek Thomas**

As Christians, we acknowledge the lordship of God, the lordship of Christ, the lordship of God the holy Trinity. God is King. He rules over everything. He is the Creator. He predestines. All things happen because he wills them to happen. We acknowledge the sovereignty of God. It underlines for us the distinction between God and the rest of creation, including ourselves. We are not gods. We were created to serve him, to give him glory, to worship him, to obey him, to live as disciples for him. It's what being a Christian means. It's one of the first things we say when we become a Christian; we call Jesus, Lord. We refer to him as *Kurios* in the Greek New Testament which was the word they translated in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It was the word they used to translate the divine name of God. "Jesus is Lord" is the ultimate profession that a Christian makes.



**Dr. David Baer**

The Old Testament, as the New, resists any inclination to restrict God's rule, his mastery, his sovereignty, to any particular facet or corner of creation. The abiding testimony of the Bible is that God rules over all because he made all and has never finally ceded authority or ownership of his all to anybody or to anything. And so we can say that he is King — to use an ancient political metaphor, very unfamiliar to us in democratic, modern societies but nonetheless we can grapple with it. He is King over all creation and over all people in that he does exercise final rule.

But having said that, we have to reckon with the reality of a broken, rebellious world and broken, rebellious people who resist being subject to any king, any ruler, no matter how benign and well-intentioned and full of blessing that that ruler is. And so people do resist God's kingship all the time and declare themselves not to be subjects of the living Lord. But he still is King, he still is Lord, and, in time, the prophets teach us to expect and to pray, as do the Psalms. The heavens and earth themselves will clap their hands, and the whole earth will be full of his glory, and those who fear the Lord and know him will cover this earth as the waters cover the sea. And so, I rest, we rest, in God's kingship, even as we wait for it to appear in an unquestionable way in his own time.

**Our understanding of who God is affects everything we think and believe. God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, is sovereign over everything. And everything he made reflects his goodness. He's the first person of the Trinity, our Father, and his power and provision will never fail us. As limited human beings, we can't know everything there is to know about God. But we can rest in his compassion and grace, knowing that he doesn't change, and that his purposes for us will certainly be fulfilled.**

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