

**The Church of God, International
Bible Correspondence Course**

LESSON 2

Knowing God: Supreme Being, or Trinity?

Where is God, and who is He? Is God even a "He" at all? What if God is beyond human comprehension, and all we can grasp of Him is a pale facsimile? A God that is so far away, so remote, is unthinkable. And pointless. Who cares about a God we cannot understand or know? He might as well be a visitor from outer space who got all this started and then left. He is no longer here, no longer involved, no longer interested. There is no point in praying to a God whom we cannot understand.

Paul knew this. He said: "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

If there were no reward at the end of the search, if there were no way that a man could come to know and understand God, then what is the point of looking for God?

But let God speak for Himself: "Thus saith Jehovah, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom. Neither let the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches. Let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me_ that I am Jehovah who exercises loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. I delight in these things" (Jeremiah 9:23,24).

God says that He can be understood_ that He can be known. Not only that, but the things we can know about Him are familiar to us. Loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness are traits we understand and value. In describing His own character in terms that we understand to be good, He lets us know that our system of thought is His system. And why not? If God made us in his image and after His likeness, then our minds should work like His mind. We should share the same system of logic (2+2=4), the same system of values (evil is evil, good is good). Our instincts, our basic fears, our capacity to think, love, and decide are designed by God, not merely that we may know Him, but that we might *relate* to Him. He that searches for God, then, can know that there is something at the end of the hunt. God is. God rewards those who seek him. God may be known. God may even be understood.

There is only one caution. God has chosen to reveal Himself to man in ways that man can understand. If we choose to try to know Him otherwise, He will remain a mystery, and we will be left confused. So in this study, we will look for God as *He reveals Himself*, realizing that the study will be a challenge, but a challenge with a reward at the end.

JUST WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "GOD"?

This lesson has to start with linguistics and semantics, for it is in the meaning and use of words that much of the confusion about the nature of God arises. What, for example, does the word god mean? The translators of our Bibles may have added to the confusion. Let me explain.

In the King James Bible, there are two words that create a problem—at least as the translators have used them. They are the English words *lord* and *god*. Different versions use different conventions, but in the King James Version (otherwise called the Authorized Version or AV), the word LORD in capital letters is a rendering of the Hebrew YHVH. If "lord" is not in capitals, it is the Hebrew *Adonai*, which properly translates as "lord." The meaning is much like the secular English word "lord." *Adonai* can apply to a man of superior rank as well as to God.

The decision of so many Old Testament translators to use LORD instead of some version of YHVH (as Yahweh or Jehovah) is reasonable enough (although the AV translators used "Jehovah" four times). There is a long tradition among Jews of refusing to articulate the divine name. The tradition arises from the third commandment which tells them not to take God's name in vain. So, when reading the Hebrew text, they customarily substitute "Adonai" for YHVH. They do this as a gesture of respect for the divine name. When Old Testament translators use LORD instead of "Yahweh" or "Jehovah," they are simply respecting Jewish tradition.

It is no sin to do that, but for our purposes it obscures the very thing we are trying to get at. All attempts to sidestep the use of the name take a step back from the personality of the one whose name is in question.

There are those who, familiar with the Hebrew roots of the Bible, choose to render YHVH as "HaShem," Actually, it is not a translation—*HaShem* is a Hebrew expression that means "The Name." Thus the Psalm would read "HaShem knows the way of the righteous." Superficially, it may sound like the translator is using a name, but in fact he is studiously avoiding doing so.

Then there is the conflict among those who differ over how to pronounce the Hebrew word YHVH. Opinions range from a majority who favor Yahweh, to fewer who favor Yahveh, Yehovah, Yahavah, and so forth. The problem is that the original Hebrew text contains no vowels, so your guess is as good as mine. One tradition takes the vowel points of *Adonai* and uses them with YHVH to create "Yehovah" or, more familiar in English, "Jehovah." (The letter j stems from the Greek iota, or i. It is merely a peculiarity of pronunciation. Note what happens when "did you" becomes "didja.")

Since there is no divine revelation on the matter, and since God does not seem so petty as to mind if we pronounce his name with an English accent, I have chosen to write it "Jehovah." I have chosen it in part because it will not fall quite so strangely on the ear. The uninitiated Bible reader might wonder who Yahweh is, but they will probably

recognize Jehovah as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And when all is said and done, even Yahweh may turn out to be an incorrect pronunciation. God will recognize those who call upon His name even if they have a foreign accent.

So when we come to YHVH in an Old Testament text, we will render it "Jehovah." You may pronounce it "Yehovah" if you wish (or Yahweh, if you are so inclined). But be sure and take note of it in your Bible as you read. There are places where it will make a difference. If you are not sure how it is treated in your Bible, read the introductory pages at the beginning of the Bible. They should explain all of the conventions used in it.

Then there is the word *God*. The words translated "god" in the Old Testament and their lexical definitions are as follows:

EL.

- 1) god, god-like one, mighty one
 - 1a) mighty men, men of rank, mighty heroes
 - 1b) angels
 - 1c) god, false god, (demons, imaginations)
 - 1d) God, the one true God, Jehovah
- 2) mighty things in nature
- 3) strength, power

ELOWAH

- 1) God
- 2) false god

ELOHIM (plural of Elowah.)

- 1) (plural)
 - 1a) rulers, judges

- 1b) divine ones
- 1c) angels
- 1d) gods
- 2) (plural intensive - singular meaning)
 - 2a) god, goddess (see 1 Kings 11:5)
 - 2b) godlike one
 - 2c) works or special possessions of God
 - 2d) the (true) God
 - 2e) God

One thing at least is clear. It is impossible to argue that the word *God* is used in only one sense. In the Bible, we can only be sure of the meaning of the word when we see it in context. The New Testament is a little more simple. Only one word is used for "God" *theos*. It is the translation of all the Hebrew words for God described above. The word for "lord" is always *kurios*, and may be used of a man, Jesus, or the Father. When New Testament writers use Old Testament quotations, they use *kurios* for both YHVH and Adonai, and *theos* for every quotation of *el*, *elowah*, and *elohim*

. I apologize for dragging you through all these technical explanations, but they may help you understand how some of the confusion arises. Now we will return to something more simple, and to try to make sense out of it for you.

To do the lesson, first read the indicated passages in your Bible, taking care to notice the context of the passage. You may want to read as much as a chapter before and after some references to be sure you have a feeling for the passage. Take your time and mark what you perceive to be important.

When you have done this, then answer the questions in the course writing your answer in your notebook after the number of the question. This is a good time to add marginal notes to your own Bible as you go. When you have written your own answers, then study our comments on each section, correcting your answers if you feel it is necessary.

Enjoy your study!

HOW MANY GODS ARE THERE?

Deuteronomy 4:33-35

1. How many Gods are there?

2. Who, exactly, is God?

Note: This is an exercise in the Hebrew words explained above. Every use of "God" is *elohim*, and "the LORD" of verse 35 is Jehovah.

3. Can there be another "God"?

Note: Easy so far, isn't it? But wait.

Isaiah 43:10

4. Was there ever a God before Jehovah?

5. Will there ever be another after Him?

Note: *In this context* the word *God* refers to the Supreme Being. If one is supreme, then there can be no others like Him. If we define "God" as "Supreme Being," then the very definition makes it impossible that there could ever be another "God" *_not even Jesus, not even the Christ*. When you read passages like this from the Old Testament, you wonder how anyone could have imagined God as a trinity.

But is this always the sense in which "God" is used?

I Corinthians 8:4-6

6. According to Paul, was there only one God?

7. Were there many that were called god?

8. How does Paul limit his use of "God" to distinguish it from others?

Note: Paul uses the expression "God the Father" to make the distinction. Most of the time, when we use the word God, we are referring to the one Supreme Being above all others_the one Jesus addressed as "Father." By definition, there can only be one being who is supreme. But through the vagaries of language, the same word can be used for others.

Is it possible for there to be only one God (in the sense of God the Father), and yet another who is called God (in the sense of God the Son)? If so, can it be shown?

Hebrews 1:1-14

9. Verses 1 and 2 speak of two "persons." How are they identified?

Note: There is much room for confusion of pronouns and antecedents in this passage. Watch them carefully.

10. Does this passage necessarily identify God as a Father?

11. Who is the One who "by Himself purged our sins"?

12. Who, then, is "the Majesty on high"? (verse 3)

13. How are those two seated in relation to one another?

14. Are Father and Son presented so we will visualize them as one individual or two?

15. Is it possible for two distinct individuals to be considered as one while retaining separate identities? (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5-6)

16. The doctrine of the trinity attempts to explain how God can be one while Christ is also God and one with God. But is it possible for the Father and the Son to be one and yet retain separate identities? (John 10:30, remember the analogy with husband and wife.)

Now for a small digression. We will return to Hebrews 1 in a moment.

John 17:1-26

17. Where was Jesus when these words were spoken?
 18. Where was the Father? (See also Matthew 5:16, etc.)
 19. Are you led to believe that they are the same identity?
 20. Are you led to believe that Jesus is one, talking to another?
 21. Is one able to glorify the other?
 22. Is one able to grant power to the other?
 23. Is one able to "send" the other?
 24. Is the Son, then, *other than* the Father?
 25. Whom did Jesus address as "the only true God"?
 26. Is there a suggestion here that Jesus existed before the world was created? (verse 5)
 27. From whom did Jesus come? (verse 8)
 28. For whom was Jesus praying?
 29. Jesus and the Father are one. *Are they to remain alone in that relationship?* (verse 21)
- Note: If God were a trinity, that situation would not outlast the resurrection. For in whatever sense Jesus and the Father are one, they are about to be joined by a host of others.
30. Were the disciples to be one in some sense other than the way Jesus and the Father are one? (verse 22)
 31. Were Jesus' disciples allowed to know the Father's name? Now to return to Hebrews.

Hebrews 1:1-14

32. What is the difference between being "made" and "begotten"?
- Note: C.S. Lewis said it well enough: "To beget is to become the father of; to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver makes a dam, a man makes a wireless set....What God begets is God....What God creates is not God."

Lewis might have added that one not only begets something of the same kind as oneself, but also *other than* oneself. One does not beget oneself.

33. Was the Son "made" (i.e., created) or begotten?
 34. Is there a suggestion of a family relationship between these two principals?
 35. Is the Son ever called "God"? (verse 8).
 36. Was the One who anointed the Son called "God"? (verse 9)
 37. Was the Son involved in the creation? (verse 2).
 38. Is the Son just another angel, or is He something quite different?
 39. How did this difference come to be? How did He obtain a more excellent name than angels?
 40. Is "God" the name of the one Supreme Being or the name of a kind of being, or both?
 41. How does one get to be an heir?
 42. Is "the Son" (i.e., Jesus) the *only* heir of God?(verse 14)
- The word *God*, then, can be used in the sense of the one Supreme Being_called God the Father_and in that sense, He is one, and there is no other. But the word God can also be

used to describe a *kind* of being_a being *begotten* by God the Father. And there *can* be others of the same *kind*.

43. What is the purpose of angels?

44. Do angels have the same relationship with God as those who are heirs of salvation?

Hebrews 2:1-18

45. Why was Jesus made, for a time, "lower than the angels"? (verse 9)

46. Who was the One "for whom are all things and by whom are all things"?

47. Who was "the captain of their salvation"?

48. What was the *objective* of His suffering? (verse 10)

49. What is the relationship between "He who sanctifies," and they who are sanctified?

50. What does it mean to say that they are "one"?

51. Why was Jesus "a partaker of flesh and blood"? (verse 14)

52. Who are "the children"? (verse 14)

53. Did Jesus ever take upon Himself the nature of an angel?

54. What nature did He assume?

55. Was Jesus ever tempted?

What we have done so far is to face the apparent conflict between the Old Testament scriptures that insist that there is only one God, and the New Testament scriptures that tell us that there are two Who are called God.

One response to this conflict was the doctrine of the trinity, developed in the early centuries after Christ. Neither the word trinity nor any direct suggestion of a *trinity* is found in the Bible, but some early theologians reasoned that it had to be so. They concluded that God is one being, composed of three persons. The semantic discussions revolving around this are endless. Is God one person with three modes of existence? Is God one individual with three faces? To further confuse the issue, words have been borrowed from the Greek. God is said to be one being or person composed of three *hypostases*

. Everything about this seems designed to turn God into a mystery, an enigma that man cannot understand. And what a man cannot understand, he cannot relate to. Yet God intends that man not only know and understand Him, He intends that man *relate* to Him.

Next month we will begin to dispel the mystery of God and to show you, in your own Bible, the answers to some of the great questions about God. The answers will come, as always, from the pages of your own Bible.

info@cgi.org

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