

The Glorious Trinity

Knowing God

By Pastor James Mansfield

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Bible Text: Genesis 1

Preached on: Sunday, March 10, 2013

Original transcript created by SermonAudio.com and further edited by:

Bethel Baptist Church

Bridgedale, Tattershall Road,

Billingham, Lincolnshire. LN4 4DD United Kingdom

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/770171

This morning's sermon is one of, if not the most difficult I have prepared. Not because it is a difficult message to deliver, but because of its concept. It is one of the subjects that is really beyond our full understanding and takes us to the edge of what we can understand. Yet when we get to the edge of our understanding we realize there is a whole lot more.

Now we are looking on these Lord's Day mornings on the subject that I have called knowing God. We have already looked at the existence of God. We looked at Genesis one and the first few words.

“In the beginning God...”¹

We looked at the evidence although we said we didn't need evidence – it is a question of faith. However we have evidence for the existence of God through the written Word of God, through the living Word of God, through our conscience and through reason in what we see around us.

And then, secondly, we looked at God as our creator.

“In the beginning God created...”²

This is the second thing that God has revealed to us and we looked at the subject of God as creator.

Now this morning I am turning to what, to me appears to be the third thing that God reveals about himself if we look at it in biblical chronological order. God announced his existence. He announces that he creates. And then he says in verse 26:

“Let us make man in our image.”³

¹ Genesis 1:1.

² Ibid.

³ Genesis 1:26.

The thing I am picking up on there is that God is using a plural personal pronoun. We have:

“Let *us* make man in *our* image.”⁴

So, you say, “Well, why is he saying that?”

There was not more than one God. Why would God use that phraseology? Well, he is revealing there what we term as the trinity. God is revealing very early on the plurality of the persons of the godhead, which you will see in a moment. Although it is a neglected topic, it is one that is so important in Scripture, and the more you look into it, the more interesting and deep you see that it is.

You may see that when the sermon is finished it has really only scratched the surface.

This is such an important subject that without at least a superficial understanding then nothing makes sense in the Bible. It is in one sense part of the glue that holds everything together.

Now to be fair it could be said that God revealed this about himself earlier, because when we read those very first words in the Bible:

“In the beginning God...”⁵

It is interesting to note that the word that God chooses to describe himself in those very first few words is the word אֱלֹהִים (el-o-heem’) in the Hebrew. And the word אֱלֹהִים (el-o-heem’) is a plural word. And what makes it more interesting—and here I bow to those who know Hebrew—is the way it is linked to the verb to create. That is singular. So there we have in the very first words of the Bible:

“In the beginning God...”⁶

God is saying there is a plurality here, but the action of creation is from one God. And really that is the concept I want to put over. We have one God, but we have this plurality in the godhead. And that is something that God is revealing here.

Now you can’t form the teaching of the trinity from one word. That would not be fair or even sensible, would it? But nevertheless, it is of interest that the God the Holy Spirit right at the beginning of the Bible introduces this concept of the trinity. And the reason he does that is because this is a great thing about God. And it is going to be found threaded throughout the Scripture. It is a vital piece of information. We must never forget that, you know, when we read the Bible God is unveiling himself. He is revealing

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Genesis 1:1.

⁶ Ibid.

himself. He is revealing himself in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And this is a very early piece of information.

One has said that if we do not grasp this truth only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our minds to the exclusion of the true God.

For centuries past this was seen as a very important issue. They understood that and if you go back through history and I am not going to give you a history lecture today, but theologians many hundreds of years ago saw the importance and came to an agreement as to what the Bible taught concerning the trinity. They nailed it and, to be fair, they nailed it reasonably well and mainstream biblical Christianity signed up to these things and maintained them down through the ages.

However, it is now becoming an issue. And I think it is probably becoming an issue today without many of us noticing. So it is an important thing that we are looking at this morning.

It can be said that the whole of the Christian faith depends on the truth of the trinity. And that is why outside of the Christian faith there is great hostility. It is amazing that the devil can attack something that we might not place as being greatly important. And the reason is because he knows it is important and, in a sad way, we could say it actually shows us that the devil knows the Bible and knows the Christian faith better than we do. And so when you find someone from the Jehovah's Witness or a Muslim talking to you,—and this has been my experience—one of the first things they will begin to talk to you about is the trinity. They may use that word, that may not use that word. It depends upon their own teaching, but they will usually start talking about the divinity of Jesus Christ. They will talk about God the Holy Spirit, how can he be God? And you will find very early on that they are trying to pull down the trinity, because they know that that is vital to Christianity.

And nothing has changed there, because when the Lord Jesus Christ was here on earth the Pharisees and the Sadducees were following in his footsteps, what was it that they particularly found despicable as far as they were concerned? It was that he called himself God. The words he spoke and works he did could only have been of God. Their main attack was that he was not God.

We might also notice that the devil who is always busy trying to make himself like God tries to shadow the trinity with his own trinity. And we might touch on that a little later. I think that bears on the end times.

The question we might like to keep in mind as we kind of go through these things is: Can someone become a Christian and not believe in the trinity? That is an important issue, isn't it? We will come back to that later.

Strange that the subject is recognized as being one of the most important in the Christian faith and yet I would have to ask you when was the last time you heard a sermon on the trinity?

Well, you say, “That is your fault. You do most of the preaching.”

Well, maybe it is. You have to preach what the Lord gives you. I am not saying every preacher gets that right, but I believe this is the right subject for this morning.

Some subjects are devotional, teaching us how to do something quite practical, fairly easy listening. Others are a bit more meat to the soul and take some concentration. And I think, perhaps, this morning is one of those. I won’t be asking questions later, but somebody else might.

I want to try to bring three things before you this morning. Firstly I want to set down very simply and concisely what God has revealed to us about this. Secondly want to explain why it is important and relevant today. Otherwise you think, well, I have got a little bit of head knowledge there, but I could have got that from reading a book. We want to know why it is important for us. And then, thirdly, why did God reveal this to us? So that is where we are going.

1 What has God revealed about himself that we refer to as the trinity?

You could look up in a concordance the word trinity and you won’t find it - it is not a word found in the Bible and yet the Bible is full of the truth of the trinity. The facts of how God reveals himself are pieced together from throughout the Bible. We have mentioned Genesis and later mention Revelation, and everywhere in between, you will find references to the trinity.

At it’s simplest you might say that, well, God is one God, but there are three persons of the godhead: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And in one sense that might be as much as we ever think of concerning the trinity. Every Christian would probably know that. But that is ok for a simple statement, but as Christians we do have a care and duty to look closely at what has God revealed about himself, because it is more than just that statement. God has chosen to reveal certain information about himself and the more I look into this the more intrigued I am about what he hasn’t revealed, because our minds can’t take it in. And that is one of the things, my friends, we ought to do - get to the edge of what we can experience with God in Scripture. I am really going to look forward to being in glory and learning some of the stuff that I don’t know yet, because that will just show how much greater God is than even what he has revealed in Scripture.

So what do we mean by the trinity? I want to lay four building blocks before you. **The first is this, that we read in Scripture that there is only one God.** That is where we have to start when we are thinking of the trinity. We put numerous references you can go to. If it was a study time I would set them all down for you. But let’s just take one or two.

Deuteronomy six verse four is one of those verses that I think every Israeli child would have been chanting and learning. It was something drummed into the children.

“The LORD our God is one LORD.”⁷

A very simple and concise statement. They lived in a pagan land surrounded by pagan gods. This is one thing that not only had God revealed, but the parents quite rightly wanted to instill into the children. There is one God and that one God is Jehovah.

The Lord says in many times—I think of that chapter in Isaiah where he repeats it a number of times—“There is none beside me. There is no other.”

The commandments tell us that, don’t they? It is not a case of God being greater than other gods. There are no other gods. God is God and there is none beside him. And God the Holy Spirit himself has revealed this to us time and time again through Scripture.

We get into the New Testament and the Lord Jesus Christ is here who is God and he says:

“I and my Father are one.”⁸

1 John 5:7 we are told:

“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word [that is Christ], and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.”⁹

So there is the first block, that we have one God.

Then we go to the next block. The Bible tells us **there are three distinct persons of the godhead**. And, again, I have said most believers will know this. But we tend to speak of them, don’t we, as being the first person, being God the Father, the second person being God the Son and the third person being God the Holy Spirit. But we must never think of them in order of ascendancy or descendancy. First person doesn’t mean God the Father is elevated above God the Son or in any way. They are co equal, but they are distinct. We are aware of the three distinct persons of the godhead, because in many places in the Scripture God has deliberately set down for us either references to the fact they are distinct, or we even have conversations between, for example, God the Father and God the Son.

John 17 is a great example where God the Son is speaking to God the Father, distinct persons. He is not talking to himself. In John one, the passage we have read, we have reference to the Word.

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4.

⁸ John 10:30.

⁹ 1 John 5:7.

“...the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”¹⁰

It tells us the Word became flesh; the Lord Jesus Christ, showing us a distinction in the persons but One God. Another example of the distinction being made clear is at Christ’s baptism. We have obviously we have Jesus Christ about to be baptized but we also see the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a dove and then the voice of God the Father; three distinct persons.

In many places in the Bible you can read of the persons of the Godhead working together. In fact, I think, you can trace the distinction and role of the three persons of the godhead in all the important parts of what we might call the biblical world order eg in creation, redemption, in church life and in end times. Wherever you look you will be able to find the distinction even when God is judging the world and about to recreate it.

If we zip to the end of the Bible, to the end of time we find this group of people that we quoted a week or two ago who are going through the tribulation period. They are angry with God because of God’s judgment. But the amazing thing is they acknowledge—they are not Atheists—they acknowledge God and actually they acknowledge at least two distinct persons of the trinity because they say in Revelation six verse 16 they cry out:

“...hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne.”¹¹

Hide us from God the Father. And then they say:

“...and from the wrath of the Lamb.”¹²

The second person of the trinity.

So even in end times when things are really in tumult, there is an acknowledgement and an awareness of at least the two persons of the trinity. Just because the Spirit is not mentioned there does not exclude his activity; each person is not always mentioned together.

You can search out some of those distinctions at some of those key places and it is a useful personal study.

So far we have got God is one and we have got three distinct persons of the godhead. We move onto another building block. **Each person of the godhead is wholly God.** Now this is where the mind begins to hit the buffers a little bit, isn’t it? And it is where faith takes hold. And maybe you can grasp a little more than me.

The three persons are not each a third of God. They are not God spread out. Nor does one person lack anything that the other persons have. They are each God and yet they are

¹⁰ John 1:1.

¹¹ Revelation 6:16.

¹² Ibid.

one. God is one indivisible divine being and each person has the entire fullness of God, the undivided being of God.

I will give you an example, Colossians 2:9. The Bible tells us:

“For in [Christ] dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”¹³

That is a great verse for that. All the fullness of the godhead, nothing missing, is in Christ. That doesn't mean God the Father all of a sudden wasn't God because it was all in Christ or God the Holy Spirit. No. They are also all God.

In Hebrews one we are told that Christ is the express image of the Father. That means he is as eternal as the Father. He has the same essence and eternity as the Father. Notice we speak of the three persons being distinct, but not separate since they are one indivisible God.

If you are in debate in with a Jehovah's Witnesses they will often take you to a number of verses and one would be in John 14 verse 28 where the Lord said:

“I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I.”¹⁴

So there is a verse that perhaps at first reading says, well, hang on a minute. It says there that the Father is greater than the Son. So how can they be co-equal? Doesn't that prove, then, that Jesus is less of a God or is a prophet? But the Father is almighty God. And that is where the Jehovah Witnesses would come.

The word greater does not refer to attributes. It does not refer to eternity. They are equal in possession, but in that particular verse, and we will find it elsewhere, there is a willing submission by God the Son to the Father. No role is greater than another. Christ is willingly submitting as he says elsewhere when he says, “I come to do the will of the Father.” He is willingly submitting. He is not making himself any lower than the Father. And elsewhere he is not making himself any higher than the Father. And he does this because of the perfect harmonious relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in the purposes that they want to fulfill. So that is the third block.

Let's put another block on top. **The personal properties or descriptions to each person of the godhead are eternal.** Again, that takes a little bit of thinking about, something we might want to marvel and wonder and ponder during the week.

For example, we are told, of God the Son's generation. When you think of Sonship we think, well, there must have been a father. There must have been a beginning. And so we think in those terms. We have to forget that when we come to the terms of God the Father and God the Son.

¹³ Colossians 2:9.

¹⁴ John 14:28.

Elsewhere the Lord Jesus Christ is referred to as the first born. And we know what first born means to us. It means he is the oldest son.

We have an example of what the Scripture means by it in the psalms. We are to look back to culture as well. David in one place is referred to as the first born. But he wasn't the first born. We know that. He was not the oldest son. And we can find that elsewhere in Scripture, but what he was, he was the preeminent one. He was the one who was taking the lead at that particular time.

Scripture is referring to him as first in position. He had preeminence over his brothers as Christ has preeminence over, for example, creation. Then we read of Christ being the only begotten Son of the Father, that he is of the Father, but he is eternally so. The relationship that God the Father has with God the Son is something from all eternity. Christ was not born of the Father in the sense that we think. He is eternal.

We think in the same way of God the Holy Spirit. He is said to proceed from the Father. People say, "Well, that shows a derogatory thing, that the Father has sent the Spirit out or whatever." No. This is a positional statement. We could say he is eternally proceeding from the Father. It doesn't mean that he is inferior in position or power. But we could go on.

Now you can find a number of illustrations that people have tried to put on paper to show us what is the relationship between the three distinct persons of the godhead, but there isn't one that fits. And the reason you can't set it down to perfectly match Scripture is because God is so unique. And in one sense if you were able to get that in diagrammatical form, we would have an illustration of God and we can't do that.

2 Why is it important to know about God in this way?

The simple answer is because God says so. It is not right to ignore information or revelation just because it is a bit difficult. It is something unique about the very essence or being of God that he wants us to know. He wants to share this about himself.

When we were talking about creation and existence we said that God created the earth and space to put it in and He created time in which these things would exist. He created all of this because there was to be a space or place where he would be able to demonstrate his power and his glory and his being. That does not appear to have happened in eternity past. There was just God. God is saying, "I want you to know this about me. I am so different. I am unique. One of the things about me is that there is this plurality, this distinction within the godhead. It marks him out from the gods of this world.

This is also important because he gives us an understanding or a greater understanding of the gospel. We could say this about creation, about sanctification, about the inspiration of Scripture. We could look at how the trinity work together in all of those activities and by looking at that gain a deeper understanding. So, for example, the gospel. The gospel

is the gospel of God and each person in the godhead is involved in bringing salvation to sinners. And again you could have a sermon on each one of these. But you may recall that when we were looking at God our creator, I said that God's plan of redemption could be said to be integral to creation, because there was no point, if I could say this with reverence, there was no point in God creating without thinking about redemption, because God knew that the devil would come and do what he did. God knew that there would need to be redemption. And that is why we read in Scripture that the plan of redemption was set down before the creation of the world. God had a logical order to all of these things. God set down that decree and he had this desire that there would be a people to his glory and the triune God had to plan how that would happen. And so we read in Scripture it is God the Father who elected a people, who elected a bride for Christ. And he did a whole lot more. I am just bringing it out in very simple terms.

A further part of that eternal plan is that God the Son would take a body of flesh and come to live in a sinner's place and to lay down his life as a sacrifice for sin, that his blood would be shed and that he would rise again. And that God the Holy Spirit would come to dead sinners and bring the saving work of Christ in conviction and regeneration bringing them to new birth.

So each person of the trinity has a particular role to play in the gospel and still plays those roles today. An understanding of those things is a part of God's revelation about the gospel and, of course, about himself.

But then it is also important because the Christ who is not of the trinity is not a Christ who can save. And here we begin to see that if Christ is not God, if this teaching I am bringing out in Scripture is not so, then his life wasn't sinless. His sacrifice wasn't a sacrifice. We have no gospel. So we begin to see this is an important issue. We begin to see that if God the Holy Spirit is not God, but some mystical influence, if he even exists at all in the minds of some people. Then the work of Christ is not applied to sinners. There is no way that anyone can be convicted, because that is the work of God the Holy Spirit. There is no way anyone can be given new spiritual life because that regenerating work is a part of the work of God the Holy Spirit. And that is it, isn't it?

If the cults, if those in Islam or whoever else deny the truth of the trinity, we have a very different God to the God of the Bible.

And people say, "Well, does it really matter?" Because the time you finish talking about Jesus and things in the Bible and the Muslims have finished talking about their Koran, we end up with God. So does it really matter? It really matters. It really, really matters. The triune God of the Bible is not the God of Islam. He is not the God of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

But let me say it is important also because to deny this truth is to deny God's Word and who he is.

I do believe it is possible for someone to come to faith without believing in all I have told

you this morning. Of course it is. It is possible because when we come to saving faith, we may not know a lot of theology, but what we do have to know is that we are sinners and that Jesus Christ is the Savior of sinners and by the Spirit of God we are able to grasp that. It does mean that we have some awareness that Christ is God. We don't necessarily have a full awareness of the whole teaching of the trinity.

But if someone says, "No, I deny the trinity. I just don't believe that." Then I cannot see how they can be a Christian, because they have no God by whom they can come to know him. They do not have God the Holy Spirit. They do not have God the Son to be a Savior. So it is vitally important.

And I will give you another reason. It is important because I think we see it reflected in end times. With the rise of Islam and the cults it is becoming more to the fore in conversation, we need to know a bit more about it. And it is one of the things that is violently objected to by such people. And this very hostility is evidence of the devil's knowledge of the importance of the trinity.

With the increase in the breadth and width of sin across the world, we have the denial of the authority that resides in God alone. God the Father is demoted to a cartoon, usually as an old man with a beard sitting on a cloud. God the Son is demoted to a possible prophet. The Holy Spirit is demoted usually to a joke or generally lost in time. Any concept of the triune God is completely lost.

But there is also the end time increase in Satanic activity. In the final book of the Bible we have Satan's reproduction of the trinity. Now remember this - before creation Satan wanted to be like God. His problem was pride. And we have got various Scriptures to tell us this, particularly Isaiah chapter 14. And there are other verses where the Lord made reference to it. He was cast out of heaven with probably millions of angels. He has never stopped wanting to be like God. And so when we get to end time sin particular, we find in the book of Revelation there is Satan as the first person of his trinity. Then we read of the rise of antichrist. People have different views as concerning who that will be. Historically the Church has often thought him to be the pope. I must admit I don't see that myself, particularly where we are today. However there he is in scripture as a reflection of the incarnation of Christ. That is why it is anti Christ. And so we have the anti-christ as Satan incarnate, the second person of his trinity. John tells us in Revelation that the anti-christ is given power appears to become a world leader. And at some point, the Scripture says, people will actually worship him. You read some of that in 2 Thessalonians two and as I indicated in the book of Revelation.

So we have got Satan himself. We have got the antichrist, Satan incarnate. And then the third person of Satan's trinity in end times is called the false prophet, the one who appears to be a leader of the world's religions.

As we see things become more global, don't think religion will escape that. Religion will become more global but don't think of that as biblical religion. We see that today in the various ecumenical and inter faith movements. And great interfaith movements they only

exclude one belief system and that is the truth as it is in scripture. That will always be the case because they deny the truth of the gospel and bring everything down to the lowest common denominator. There is not time to take that further, but I mention it for completeness.

Now, thirdly, and a little briefly:

3 Why has God revealed this to us?

I believe God has revealed as much about himself as he knows we can take on board. And, if we are honest, we don't very often take all on board that he has revealed to us. And this particular aspect of God relates to his very being.

You know, we may talk at some point about God being good. That is a great subject but that is something about God; that is his attributes, as it were. When we think of the trinity we are looking at God himself. It relates to his very being and his essence. And it is not surprising when we begin to think about the very essence of being of God the Spirit of God that we are taken to the edge of our understanding. And God has revealed it to us because as Calvin puts it, this is a special mark that distinguishes God from idols. You will not find this in any idol, not a pretend god anywhere. This is special about God and God says, "I am special. I am unique. There is none other beside me. This is what I am like: Father, Son and Holy Spirit and yet I am God. You can't all take it in yet, but I will tell you as much as you can take in."

He has revealed this about himself, because it is very much of who he is. If this is not *a* big thing about God, it is *the* big thing about God. It is soaked into every page of Scripture, if we will but look for it. Perhaps it is more like a water mark. You know, you get a page that is nice and clean. Hold it up to the light and you can see it is full of text or pictures of a watermark. And so it is with Scripture. We read what Scripture says. We hold it up to the light and there is the watermark. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Why has he revealed it to us? Also because it helps us to understand more about our witness and our preaching of the gospel as we learn more of the work of those distinct persons of the trinity. When we preach the gospel, when you witness, God the Holy Spirit is the one who is going to do the work of convicting that person you are talking to. So let's work on the same level as God the Holy Spirit. Let's use the Word that he has given us. Let's use the right things, as it were and things that he will be pleased to use.

Perhaps another example is your prayer, isn't it? Ephesians two verse 18 says we pray through Christ. We are praying to God the Father, but we come through Christ and we have access to the Father by the Spirit. So we begin to learn a little bit about prayer by looking at the distinct goals of God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are not told in Scripture to pray, for example, to God the Holy Spirit. We are told to pray to the Father, but we do it through the merits of Jesus Christ. And it is the Spirit of God who takes of these things to the Father and presents them in words and in ways that we can't

present them.

Also He has revealed himself to us that we might know more about the one who loved us, more about the one who planned our salvation, that we might know more of the power and the mind and the uniqueness of the one who will see us through time and into eternity.

In other words, as the hymn writer says. This is the God we adore, our faithful, unchangeable friend.

How can a God who is so great and indescribable yet say, “I am a friend of sinners”? Do we not begin to see some of the great depth that he came when he came to earth from such glory and wonder? And yet to become one of his creation and to go to the cross of Calvary.

Well, those are the three things I promised: -

- What has God revealed to himself about what we call the trinity? I have given you those four building blocks.
- I have at least in part explained why it is important that we know this about God.
- And I have tried to say why God has revealed this to us.

Let's just make some closing application. First of all, that I should adore him in all his trinitarian majesty. No, I don't understand it all, but I believe all that God has decided to reveal to me and the more I see, the more it is amazing. I can only guess at what lies beyond my understanding. One has said, we can only gasp at what we can't grasp. But we are to grasp what God has given to us in Scripture.

But also that we might get to grips with knowing more of God in three persons, a greater understanding of the gospel, a greater understanding of our prayer life, maybe a greater understanding of sanctification and other areas that we could look into, that we might know God's order of things.

And then, finally, he has revealed these things to us that we might know him, that we should seek him with all our hearts and know whom we are seeking, not an empty word that just says God, but that we might know something of the substance of God.

All this was done and revealed that you and I might come to know him - Jesus said whom to know is life eternal. It is the triune God that we shall meet one day. And when we stand before him, you will stand either in your sin or you will stand in grace. That depends on your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Oh, that you might know this morning that we are born in sin, that we are breakers of God's law. And we were not just left to go off to judgment and to eternal damnation, but the great triune God worked out a great intricate plan of salvation, the only means there could be that we should be forgiven and brought back to God. And he has done it: Father, Son and Holy Spirit have brought about this great saving work.

And the call this morning is that God commands all men everywhere to repent. It is not an idea. It is not a concept. It is not like joining the AA. We have a command of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit commands that you turn from your sin and turn to Christ and take all that he has done for you.

I know the words I have given you this morning are inadequate. I have tried to describe the indescribable. But where my words fail, may God the Holy Spirit give light and life. Amen.