

THE GREAT PROMISE

John 3:1-17, Text vs. 16 *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

In Johannesburg, South Africa, there’s a tree standing in the yard of a Catholic retreat center when viewed from one angle looks a single tree with a large trunk. But from another angle, the tree is three separate trees right down to their roots. The tree’s nickname is *Trinity*. —*Three-in-One*. People who stand at the base of that tree feel as if they are being drawn in to it. And no matter where you lean on the tree, you are supported. It holds you up. And no matter where you gaze on it, it’s beautiful. Three trunks. One tree. Three trees, yet one, which makes that tree a persuasive illustration for the existence of our Triune God. Three in one.

Whether calling God Yahweh. Calling Him Jesus. Or Holy Spirit, He is Three-in-One. Inseparable and unified. No matter what name or title you call Him, He will hear you. No matter where you look, you can see the beauty of God. God the Creator. God the Savior. God who Empowers. God who draws you into a loving relationship with Him. And with one another. Yes, that tree in Johannesburg is amazing.

And so is our God! Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is a fundamental doctrine in Christianity that describes God existence as three distinct persons: The Father, who is the first person of the Trinity. The Son, Jesus Christ, who is the second person of the Trinity. And The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. These three persons are distinct yet share the same spirit. They make the doctrine of the Trinity central to Christian beliefs about God.

Yes, it’s challenging to fully comprehend the mysterious unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three in one. It’s hard to understand. Still, the Trinity is rooted in the fact that God is known first, as Creator. Creator of the universe, the stars, the planets, the Earth on which we live. Secondly, He is Lord in the incarnated figure of Jesus Christ who lived among us and became the “Resurrected One”. And thirdly, He is the Holy Spirit. The helper. The intercessor who brings power to your life.

But the word “Trinity” or the doctrine of the Trinity, only appears in the New Testament. Jesus and His followers did not want to contradict the Shema in the Hebrew Scriptures: *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.”* (Deuteronomy 6:4) The Shema (Hebrew: שמע ישראל) is the basic confirmation in Judaism that expresses belief in the Oneness of God. Traditionally, the Shema is recited twice a day. Morning (Shacharit) and evening (Arvit or Ma’ariv) prayer services. The Shema consists of: *Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One:* (In Hebrew: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד) (Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad) from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. When saying the first words of the Shema, it is a universal Jewish custom to cover one’s eyes with the right hand to allow one to concentrate properly without visual distraction. Just like closing your eyes during deep concentration. This allows one to focus on the essential words expressing faith in God and God’s unity.

Then, *Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever:* (In Hebrew: בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד) (Baruch shem kavod malchuto l’olam va-ed). This remainder of the Shema prayer comes from three biblical passages (Deuteronomy 6:5-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41) which stress loving God with all one’s heart, soul, and might. Those words were taught to their children. And they bound God’s words in a tiny black box on their hands and arms and on their forehead. The arm-tefillah is placed on the upper (non-dominant) arm and consists of a small black leather box containing a parchment scroll with verses from the Torah. The Law of Moses. A black leather strap is wrapped around the forearm, hand, and middle finger. The head-Tefillin (Shel Rosh) is positioned between the eyes, at the boundary of the forehead and hair, and like the arm-tefillah bound around the head with a black leather strap. It also contains a parchment scroll with Torah verses. The Shema is a religious commandment, a mitzvah, for observant Jews declaring their faith and commitment to God.

The earliest Christians, however, had Jesus Christ and the presence and power of God in the Holy Spirit connected with Pentecost, which we studied last week. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were now related to New Testament passages such as the Great Commission: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* (Matthew 28:19) And in the apostolic benediction: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all..”* (2 Corinthians 13:13) So, the New Testament established the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity.

But, if God is three Persons, does it mean each Person is “one-third” of God? Does the Trinity mean God is divided into three parts? No, the Trinity does not divide God into three parts. The Bible is clear on that! All three Persons are one hundred percent God! The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all fully God. Colossians 2:9 says of Jesus that *“in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”*

So, don’t think of God like a “pie” cut into three pieces with each piece representing one Person. That would make each Person of the Godhead less than fully God. Rather, *“the being of each Person, is equal to the whole being of God.”* The divine spirit is not something that’s divided between three persons. The divine spirit is fully in all three persons without being divided into “parts.” So, the Son is not one-third of the being of God. He is all the being of God. The Father is not one-third of the being of God, He is all the being of God. And likewise with the Holy Spirit. As Wayne Grudem a

distinguished theologian, seminary professor, and author wrote, *“When we speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, we are not speaking of any one being greater than the other when we speak of the Father alone, the Son alone, or the Holy Spirit alone.”* There is only one God!

So, if each Person of the Trinity is separate, yet fully God, should you assume there is more than one God? No, you shouldn't! Scripture is clear there is only one God: *“There is no other God besides me, a righteous God, and a Savior; there is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”* (Isaiah 45:21-22; see also 44:6-8; Exodus 15:11; Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:4-5; 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:2; 1 Kings 8:60) Now, having heard that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct Persons, and that they are each fully God, and that there is only one God, you must conclude all three Persons are the same God. In other words, one God exists as three distinct Persons. And if there is one passage which most clearly brings all of this together, it is Matthew 28:19: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

Notice, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are shown as distinct Persons. We baptize into the name of the Father. We baptize into the name of the Son. We baptize into the name of and the Holy Spirit. So, each Person must be deity. Because they are all placed on the same level. In fact, would Jesus have us baptize in the name of just one person? No! Therefore, each of the three Persons into whose name we are baptized must be deity. And although the three divine Persons are distinct, we are baptized into one name (singular), not names (plural). There are many illustrations which have been offered to help understand the Trinity. While there are some illustrations which are helpful, you should recognize no illustration is perfect.

One illustration to be aware of is the one which tries to explain how God can be both one and three says, *“I am one person. But I am a student, a son, and a brother”* The problem with that is, it reflects a heresy called *modalism* which denies the individualism of the three Persons of the Trinity. While modalism has historical roots, it is heretical. Within mainstream Christian theology, God is *not* one person who plays three distinct roles as that illustration suggests. He is one Being. In three Persons. (centers of consciousness) Not three roles. That analogy ignores the personal distinctions within God and reduces them to mere roles. The Trinity is important because God is important.

To understand more fully what God is like, is to honor God. Knowing God is triune, deepens your worship. You exist to worship God. And God seeks people to worship Him in *“spirit and truth.”* (John 4:24) Always try to deepen your worship of God in truth. As well as in your heart. And in prayer the Trinity is especially important. The general pattern of prayer is to pray to God in the name of the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 2:18) By being aware of the distinct role each Person of the Trinity has in your salvation, you can have greater comfort and appreciation for God in your prayers and be more specific in your prayers. Recognize the distinct role that each Person of the Trinity has. Never think of their roles as separate from the other because everything one does; the other two persons of the Trinity are also involved in one way or another.

So, the differences within the Godhead are not differences of God's spirit. Neither are they something added on to God's spirit. They are the unfolding of God's one, undivided Being into three interactive relationships that are three real Persons. This doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained in the true church from the time of the apostles until now. Even though this doctrine exceeds all human understanding, nevertheless, we believe it. And through the written Word, the Bible, we wait to fully know and enjoy the Triune God in heaven. AMEN