



# The Doctrine of God

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NIAMEY : NIGER

*THE DOCTRINE OF GOD*

Africa Theology Series

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## INTRODUCTION TO ATS

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The Africa Theology Series is a multi-volume series of books on Christian Theology. Unlike a typical systematic theology, each book in this series is a stand alone volume on a specific topic or doctrine. Also, unlike a traditional systematic theology, this series expands the scope to include biblical, systematic and applied theology. The goal is to give the African church a biblically faithful and contextually appropriate tool to help them, as Jude 3 states, “Contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Briefly introducing such a comprehensive work like the Africa Theology Series poses quite a challenge which is why an entire separate volume is devoted to introducing the series. In that first and key volume, the reader is provided with a foundation for all the subsequent volumes. This introductory volume explains the uniqueness of this series and explore baseline understandings of key components in the series. The introductory volume covers the contextual emphasis, the hermeneutical grounding and the theological framework for this series.

Therefore, the purpose of this brief introduction is neither an attempt to replicate nor replace the Introductory volume. To truly benefit from this series, one must start with that foundational volume.

Instead, this brief introduction is provided to explain four underlying goals for this series. Understanding these goals will help the reader gain the most insight when reading each separate volume. These goals are:

- Bridging knowledge with action
- Interacting with major faith systems
- Moving from defense to offense
- Creating a readable and helpful resource

### **Know, Be, Do: Bridging Knowledge with Action**

Each volume in the Africa Theology Series seeks to move the reader from theological foundations (Know) to cultural implications (Be) then finally to practical applications (Do). In the African context, the concrete is much more impactful

than the theoretical. In fact, oftentimes grievous errors in the pulpit or in pastoral practice come from those who can articulate the great doctrines of the faith both eloquently and sufficiently. These men often hold degrees from theological institutions where they were trained in sound doctrine and biblical orthodoxy. In other words, the errors that seem to plague the African church aren't necessarily from a lack of knowledge but rather from a lack of application of that knowledge into practice.

A short-sighted overcorrection would be to throw out knowledge-based teaching and instead simply focus on obedience-based action. However, this would be just as dangerous and ultimately counter-productive to healthy church. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not against one another but rather two sides of the same coin. To have one without the other is not only incomplete but insufficient to build a biblically faithful and missions minded church.

The Africa Theology Series addresses these challenges by helping the pastor or church leader see the interconnectedness of knowledge and action. There is an African proverb that says, "Two hands wash one another." We need both knowledge and obedience. Therefore, each volume will, in its own unique way, lay a theological foundation for the specific doctrine being addressed as the authors seek to answer the question, "What should I know?"

The reader will then be challenged to see how this knowledge (what I know) necessarily informs identity (who I am). Every culture has elements that the Bible can affirm and appreciate and also elements the Bible condemns and corrects. Seeing your culture and your worldview through the Biblical lens is a painful but necessary step. In fact, this step of transformed hearts is the bridge needed on the path from transformed minds to transformed actions. The authors will challenge the reader to think deeply and introspectively about the cultural implications of doctrine as they seek to answer the question, "Who should I be?"

After knowledge and being comes doing. This is where information gets to work. Sound doctrine is not merely for the academic minded nor should it be reserved only for the seminary classroom. Instead, right doctrine must be applied and spill over into right practice. The authors of each volume will assist the reader in understanding the practical application of the doctrine in their lives as they answer the final question, "What should I do?"

The following statement provides a short summation of this goal:

**KNOWLEDGE** *informs* **BEING** *which drives* **DOING**



### **My Neighbor's Faith: Interacting with Major Faith Systems**

Another unique feature of the Africa Theology Series involves interaction with other major worldviews/religions. Africa is a very religious place where atheists are few and far between. Whereas books from the West might lean more into apologetical arguments aimed at skeptics, this series looks to interact with the other major faith systems on the continent.

While there are obviously outliers, the majority of Africans fall into one of several religious categories. These categories are much more diverse than a simplistic designation and are oftentimes complex combinations of two distinct categories into one. One such example would be the syncretization of two distinct categories (Islam and ATR) into one faith system (Folk Islam).

Practically this means that two Muslim men from the same tribe and living in the same city might have drastically different understandings of their faith. This also implies that some who would claim to be Evangelical Christians actually practice a much more animistic faith. These nuances and caveats are real and rampant but beyond the scope of this series, which will examine only the orthodox positions of each faith system.

However, the problem of neatly labeling categories becomes even more challenging due to the ambiguous nature of African Traditional Religion (ATR). There is no such thing as THE African Traditional Religion with an agreed upon set of beliefs. Instead, ATR is a large designation for those who would cling to an animistic faith ranging from voodoo to ancestral worship and everything in between.

It would be impossible to try and interact with every potential version of each faith system. However, it is incredibly important to understand the basic tenets (even if not held by everyone in the same way) of the major faith systems on the continent. In other words, it is helpful to know what an “average” Muslim believes about the doctrine of God and how that’s different than the Evangelical Christian. Therefore, each volume in this series will provide side-by-side comparisons to highlight major differences between Evangelical Christians and these other religious systems.

### **Changing Tactics: Moving from Defense to Offense**

There is an anecdotal account of how those working to detect counterfeit currency spend their time only examining real currency. The story is used to illustrate the importance of focusing time and energy studying the truth instead of spending time dealing with falsehoods. While this is a point worth noting and

we would agree that knowing the truth is of utmost importance, we also believe it is a good and biblical practice to expose falsehoods.

The Africa Theology Series adopts an offensive standpoint instead of choosing to play defense alone. Far from being done in a mean-spirited fashion, each volume takes pastoral care to warn the flock of the dangers of false doctrines currently wreaking havoc on the African Church.

The prosperity gospel and many practices in Neo-pentecostalism pose an even greater threat to healthy church and missions advance than Islam or ATR. Throughout the New Testament there is a constant warning of dangers that arise from wolves pretending to be sheep. These dangers are especially devastating because they come from within the church. Paul tells the church in Corinth of a tactic of Satan wherein he disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

Any good shepherd knows he is responsible to care for his flock. This means two things practically: one, he must provide for them by leading them to grazing grounds and sources of water; secondly, and just as important, he must protect them by keeping them from dangers which seek to harm the flock.

In the same way pastors must provide and protect their flocks. They must lead their people to the green pastures of God's Word and to drink from the Living Water of knowing Christ. However, pastors must be able to defend their flock and protect them from enemies who would seek to destroy and harm.

Each volume will seek to expose the various errors and dangerous ways of prosperity teachers and Neo-pentecostal practitioners. The authors will show how these false teachers twist and misuse the Scriptures and, therefore, confuse various key doctrines. The hope, then, is that these volumes will help pastors and church leaders protect both themselves and their flocks by nurturing a spirit of discernment that can detect and expose unbiblical teaching and practices.

### **Short and Simple: Creating a Readable and Helpful Resource**

The American author Mark Twain once said, "I'm sorry this letter is so long. I did not have time to write a short one." In this quote Twain reveals a common misconception that the more words that are spoken (or typed) then the better the content. While it is true that sometimes exhaustive explanations are necessary, the reality is most subjects can be sufficiently and succinctly explained without endless words.

The volumes in the Africa Theology Series are intentionally short and written in a way to be accessible to the largest audience of readers. The shortness

comes from a ruthless approach to writing that seeks to explain the most significant truths with the fewest amount of words in the simplest way possible.

The goal is to create a resource that is readable and helpful. The authors seek to use story, dialog, proverbs, concrete examples, and other illustrious words to help complicated doctrines become understandable and applicable. Each volume also includes quick access reference guides for comparative charts on the various beliefs of each faith system.

### **The Journey Ahead**

There is an African proverb that says, “A baby on its mother's back doesn't know the journey is long.” Everyone, to some level, has benefited from the hard work of others. Teachers, pastors, theologians, authors, professors, parents, and myriads of others have suffered greatly to carry us along. We are where we are today because of their sacrifice.

The volumes in the Africa Theology Series have come about because many men who have many responsibilities deemed it worthy to set aside time to create the resource you now hold in your hand. These resources are the result of countless hours of work so that the African church might grow in her faithfulness to the task. Our hope is that their sacrifice “carries” you along in your faith journey.

Mark Phillips and Kevin Rodgers  
Series editors



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## INTRODUCTION

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*Who is God?* is part of the African Theology Series by ELEAF publishing. This volume in the series teaches a traditional category of dogmatics or systematic theology, which is the doctrine of God. While the subject matter is a classic discussion in theology, the manner of presentation for a theology book is not.

*Who is God?* is a story of a day in the life of a student in secondary school in Lomé, Togo. As he wrestles with a question posed by his public school teacher, Koffi relies upon the sage wisdom of his uncle, Esaiiah. What follows is a discussion not only between Koffi and Uncle Esaiiah but also his cousins and other family members who live in the same courtyard. The discussion slowly examines all the traditional themes that one would read in a classical book of theology. Only the subjects are part of a lively discussion with Koffi, Uncle Esaiiah, and sometimes other family members.

This story format is intentional. Our desire is to make theological subjects more accessible for the average pastor living in West Africa. Time and the responses from our readers will indicate whether we have accomplished our goal. Our prayer is that we will have made subjects available to a wider audience that some people may dismiss as belonging exclusively to a seminary classroom.

In traditional African village life, elders pass on traditional culture and local heritage to the younger generations through stories. We have sought to follow that traditional wisdom in making theology available to, not only pastors, but even church members who have never been to seminary or received a certificate in divinity.

Traditionally, what theologians say or write about God determines the direction for the rest of their theological statements. That fact is why we have taken the development of this work with the utmost seriousness. What we write here may impact what readers may understand in future additions to this series. That is why we believed that it was important to address some critical issues before we even started the traditional categories of the doctrine of God.

In discussing various theological subjects, we proceed with telling the story of Koffi. The first chapter merely describes the setting as well as the problem that Koffi faces from one of his teachers that challenges his Christian faith. The chapters that follow answer some preliminary questions before we can even begin a theological discussion about who God is and what the Bible says about Him. That is why the next chapter addresses why we read the Bible and why we proclaim the God of Christianity as the one true God.

Afterwards, the chapters follow a more traditional format from systematic theology, only they are within the story format of Koffi's dialogue with Uncle Esaiah. Topics like how God is both like and unlike us, the Trinity, as well as providence and predestination progress as the story unfolds. In addition, we have included a chart that compares evangelical Christian belief with other religious groups. It is our hope and intention that the reader will become not only better informed about what Christianity teaches but why what the Bible says is superior to anything that others teach and proclaim.

Read, learn, and we hope that you will put into practice what you discover within the covers of this book. Teach these truths to fellow believers as well as your family members. If you are a pastor, perhaps this book could serve to inform members of your congregation. More than anything, what we want this volume to accomplish is to inform the churches of francophone Africa about Christian teaching. Furthermore, we wish to build up the church of Jesus Christ and ultimately to glorify God.

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## CHAPTER 1

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### WHOSE GOD? WHOSE HOLY TEXT

Koffi walked home from school with a group of his peers. The sun beat down on the students as they walked *en masse* down the dusty road on this Thursday afternoon. Koffi adjusted his backpack on one shoulder as a string of motorcycle taxis zipped past dangerously close to the pedestrians. Passing a street vendor at the side of the road, Koffi counted his change and paid for a Fandango, a fruit drink kept cool inside the vendor's cart. The high temperatures encouraged this indulgence; normally, Koffi contented himself with a plastic bag filled with PurWater. Condensation formed on the fruit drink container as he wiped it across his perspiring brow. "How do I answer M. Amekudzie?" Koffi wondered to himself yet again. As the group of students walked the remaining distance to their homes, Koffi remained silent and finished his Fandango before throwing it in a ditch line littered with trash. Finally, he reached the dirt path that would lead to his house. Koffi left his peers, veering away from the side of the dirt road as he walked down the steep incline on the dirt path that left the roadside and led to the walled compounds of residences on the outskirts of Lomé, the capital city of Togo.

Koffi had not always lived in Lomé. Before his father had died, the whole family - his dad, mom, two brothers and one sister, all lived across the Ghana border close to the Volta river. That all changed when Koffi was still very young. His father had always warned the children of the dangers of walking along the roadside. As a taxi driver between Accra and Lomé, Koffi's father had seen his share of traffic fatalities. Koffi, only eight years-old at the time, never believed that his father would become another statistic. That changed the day that two lorries, driving at high-speed side-by-side along the highway, ploughed head-on into his father's taxi on a high-speed ribbon of road outside of Accra. Both of Koffi's parents were Ewe, but his father was from the Ghana side of Ewe land and his mother was from the French-speaking Togo side. Once his father was buried with all proper ceremony, the family moved into a compound with his

mother's extended family in Lomé. As he walked down the narrow dirt path, Koffi replayed the episode in class again and again. "*How do I answer M. Amekudzie?*"

Koffi opened the metal gate to the cinder block wall that encircled the compound on which his extended family lived. Outside, his sister Marie was styling the hair of a client, Giselle, a neighbor in their quartier. Other family members, including cousins, aunts, and uncles, were sitting on the terrace outside the house. Koffi exchanged a few polite greetings with them as he walked to his own family's lodgings inside the *attendant* in the courtyard. In colonial French style, many houses had an outbuilding within the walled courtyard. The *attendant* normally included a garage for the vehicle to park in addition to one or two rooms for the gate guard to rest when he was not answering the gate. Koffi's extended family, having neither vehicle nor gate guards, allowed his mother to move into the *attendant* with her children ten years ago after his father had died. The girls slept on mats in one room; Koffi and his brothers shared the adjacent room. Privacy was at a premium.

In his room inside the *attendant*, Koffi changed out of his school uniform and hung it on a nail on a wall. He then slid into some ripped jeans and a red T-shirt emblazoned with "San Francisco '49ers, 2020 Super Bowl Champions" across the front of it. Koffi did not know, nor did he care that the '49ers had not, in fact, won the Super Bowl that year. Continually, Koffi mentally replayed the interaction that he had with his teacher at the public school earlier that morning. "*How do I answer M. Amekudzie?*"

The morning had gone well at first. Koffi was a diligent student who achieved high marks in his studies. He had dreams of attending the University of Lomé and becoming a physician. Then he would open his own practice and eventually raise enough money to buy land and build a house big enough for his mother and sisters to live together with him. Koffi had been, in fact, daydreaming about the dimensions of his future house when his teacher, M. Amekudzie, snapped him out of his own thoughts. The morning quickly down spiraled from there.

"Atekpolo, are you with us?"

Koffi, hearing his surname, immediately snapped to attention. His mind raced, trying to recall the direction that the class discussion had taken during his moment of mental absence.

"*Yes, sir!*" Koffi immediately responded.



“Atekpolo, perhaps you would like to help us with the discussion that we have been having about religion?”

M. Amekudzie, having studied abroad in France before returning to Togo, was proud of his education. He often acted as if he regretted living in this part of Togo in this dead-end job that paid little if the check arrived at all. He seemed to enjoy making examples of students in class if he thought that they could provide him with some form of diversion from his day-to-day dreariness. Koffi groaned inwardly. Apparently, he was the designated target for today’s public demonstration.

“What about religion?” Koffi asked.

“Clearly, you have not been following the discussion, Atekpolo. We have been discussing ideas of British intellectuals from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. David Hume said that we should not trust anything that we cannot prove with our senses. What say you?”

Amekudzie looked triumphant as he asked the question.

“Well, sir, I would say that it would depend on what it was that you were talking about,” replied Koffi.

“Meaning what, exactly, M. Atekpolo?”

M. Amekudzie seemed to be circling in for the kill. Koffi wanted to be ready, but he was not sure where Amekudzie was taking the discussion.

“I suppose, for example, that would be true for scientists and for engineers. But it would not apply in other areas,” Koffi responded.

“And why would it not apply in other areas?” M. Amekudzie inquired.

Amekudzie was not going to let go easily this time. Koffi swallowed, then began to answer the question.

“What about the things that we cannot test because we cannot see them, cannot touch them, cannot feel them?” Koffi asked.

“What things are those, M. Atekpolo?”

“Now I’m going to get it,” thought Koffi.

“I’m talking about what we believe to be true in religion,” Koffi blurted out.

“Which one? We have a lot from which to choose,” M. Amekudzie snorted.

“I believe in things that I cannot see, but are mentioned in the Bible,” Koffi responded.

M. Amekudzie smiled for the first time. Apparently, he had been waiting for Koffi to catch up with the rest of the class. Once Koffi had mentioned the Bible, however, Amekudzie seemed to become animated.

“Ah, yes, the Bible. Which one?” M. Amekudzie asked Koffi.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.” Koffi answered truthfully.

“I mean to which Bible are you referring? I believe that you are a Protestant? So then, do you mean the Protestant Bible? Why not the Catholic Bible? It has more books in it than your Protestant Bible. Or why not the Bible that the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses prints? So then, which is it?”

Like a hunter, M. Amekudzie seemed to be circling his prey.

“I would use the Bible that I take to church with me every Wednesday and Sunday,” replied Koffi.

“And what certainty do you have that your Bible is the correct one? Do you have evidence that I can see?” asked M. Amekudzie.

“In fact, M. Atekpolo, have you ever seen an angel?”

“No,” Koffi replied.

“Indeed. And yet you believe that angels exist?” Amekudzie asked.

“Yes, I do. In fact, I know that they exist.” Koffi shot back.

“Really? Why do you believe in something that you have never seen, heard, or touched?” M. Amekudzie asked.

“I take it on faith in what I read from the Bible,” Koffi replied.

“Aha! Is that the best that you can do, M. Atekpolo? Faith? And what makes your faith better than the Muslim’s?” Amekudzie asked.

“In fact, why do you believe anything at all that you have not seen, or heard, or verified in some way that it does, in fact, exist? Have you even seen God? Is God the Christian God, or the Muslim Allah, or the distant god that our traditional religions claim exists?” Amekudzie continued.

Defeated, Koffi had no answer. He did not know where to go with the line of questioning that M. Amekudzie was giving him. He sank in his seat, beaten at last.

“So then, Atekpolo, why believe in God? You haven’t seen Him.”

Koffi sat slumped in his chair and said nothing. Amekudzie sneered. He seemed triumphant over yet another victory in a battle of the intellects. The classroom remained silent while Amekudzie seemed to enjoy standing over his defeated foe.

“Atekpolo, you disappoint me. I expected more from the president of the youth group at Harmony Baptist Church.”

That was a vicious blow at Koffi. The rest of the class had not seen a student receive as much abuse as they witnessed today. Koffi expressed his Christian belief openly at school, though he had never been confrontational to the Roman Catholic or Muslim students in the classroom. His uncle, Esaiiah, had taught him Scripture memory verses since his family had moved into the compound in Lomé. His father had been Roman Catholic and the family had been dutiful in attending Mass every week. That changed once his mother moved the family to Lomé. Their uncle Esaiiah, his mother’s older brother and the family patriarch, had urged that all attend services together at a local Baptist church in Lomé. Koffi had few memories of his time at the Catholic church in Ghana. All that he had known about God came from his uncle and their involvement at Harmony Baptist Church.

It became evident that M. Amekudzie was doing more than leading a class discussion about English intellectuals this afternoon. He was lashing out at Koffi for what he represented at school and for what he believed. Koffi understood precisely what Amekudzie was doing but he felt powerless to respond or retaliate in any way.

“M. Atekpolo, I am giving you a special assignment. Tonight, you will consider why you can tell me that you believe in someone, something, that you have never seen, heard, nor witnessed. You will deliver a five-minute response in class first thing tomorrow. Be prepared for follow-up questions from me.”

Koffi recalled the events in the classroom as he walked outside into the courtyard. He saw his uncle, Esaiiah, sitting under a mango tree, working on a motorcycle. Esaiiah was a mechanic who repaired vehicles and motorcycles for a living. Esaiiah had a shortwave radio playing a Christian program while he tightened a bolt on the motorcycle. As soon as he saw Koffi approaching, him, Esaiiah smiled and set his wrench down on the ground.

“Koffi, tell me about school today?”

Koffi smiled grimly but said nothing.

“That bad, huh? Why don’t we talk about it?”

Koffi shrugged, then explained what happened in class with M. Amekudzie. As Esaiiah heard everything that Koffi told him, he nodded slowly. Once Koffi finished by describing the class assignment from M. Amekudzie, Esaiiah nodded his head. Wiping his hands of grease, he asked Koffi’s eight-year-old cousin, Samuel, to fetch his Bible inside the house. Samuel returned in minutes, handing Esaiiah his Bible.

Esaiiah had served as a deacon at Harmony Baptist for the last fifteen years. He also had been a Sunday School teacher for over twenty. As he flipped through the pages of his Bible, Esaiiah cleared his throat and said, *“Koffi, it’s time that you know not just what you believe but why. Unless you do, the jackals will come and they will pick your bones clean.”*

Although his uncle had only finished his baccalaureate diploma and had repaired motorcycles his entire adult life, Koffi never questioned his uncle’s wisdom. Even though he was soon to enter the university next fall, Koffi understood that he had much to learn from his mechanic uncle. Koffi leaned closer to his uncle, realizing that he was about to receive the education that he could not through M. Amekudzie.

## Chapter One Questions

1. Do you sometimes have doubts about your Christian beliefs? If so, when do these doubts seem to surface?

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2. Have you ever had an experience similar to Koffi's? Have you heard objections to Christianity similar to those expressed by M. Amekudzie? How did you respond to these objections?

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3. Do other Christians or members of your family ever mention these objections to Christianity to you? How do you respond?

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4. What do you hope to learn after reading through *Who is God?* Are there answers to specific questions for which you are searching? Write them down in the lines below.

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We cannot promise that we will give answers to all questions or respond to every objection. However, we hope that in the following chapters, the dialogue between Koffi and his uncle Isaiah will provide answers to many of the common questions that people ask about the God of the Bible.



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## CHAPTER 2

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### **DOES GOD EXIST? WHY FOLLOW ANY RELIGION AT ALL?**

Koffi recounted to Esaiiah the events in class between M. Amekudzie and himself. He included every question that M. Amekudzie had thrown at him. The whole time, Esaiiah nodded his head and listened. He never made any verbal reactions as Koffi told the details. When Koffi finished with an explanation of the assignment that M. Amekudzie had given him, Esaiiah exhaled loudly.

“What can my uncle tell me that can satisfy M. Amekudzie?” wondered Koffi.

Esaiiah began flipping through his Bible until he turned to a passage near the very end.

“Koffi, answer me something. M. Amekudzie said that he cannot believe in something that does not have some kind of physical proof. Is that right?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“M. Amekudzie also says that he cannot believe in angels, demons, or even in God because he does not have any physical evidence for their existence. Am I correct?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Koffi, did M. Amekudzie give any physical evidence for why he won’t accept anything that does not have physical evidence as proof?”

Koffi looked thoughtful. “I didn’t hear any,” he replied truthfully.

“So then, he has told his students that they should not accept any claim that has not been physically proven; yet, he himself has failed to provide any physical evidence for why we should accept his test for what is true,” Esaiiah continued.

“Yes, that is what I believe he has done,” answered Koffi.

“Well, then, Koffi, I believe that you can sincerely ask M. Amekudzie why he questions your belief in God when his own belief system cannot measure up to its own standard of what is true or false.”

Koffi stood dumbstruck at his uncle’s words. Why had he not seen it before? Of course, what his uncle Esaiiah was saying made sense. But then, Koffi had another thought.

“But Uncle, all that we have done is demonstrate why we can’t believe in anything, not even M. Amekudzie’s own philosophy,” Koffi said.

“Well, Koffi, now we have to return to the Bible,” answered Esaiiah.

“But Uncle, M. Amekudzie will ask why I chose the Bible. And not just the Bible, but he will ask why the Protestant Bible instead of the Catholic Bible and why do I not select the Koran” replied Koffi.

Esaiiah asked one of Koffi’s cousins for his reading glasses. As the eight-year-old ran inside the house to fetch Esaiiah’s glasses, Koffi tried not to show his disappointment.

“He doesn’t know how to answer this question,” Koffi thought.

Koffi’s cousin ran back to Esaiiah, handing him his glasses. Esaiiah flipped through some more pages in his Bible before he responded to Koffi’s question.

“Koffi, I am reading to you from Hebrews 1:1-2. It says, “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.”

“Uncle, you know that I believe that. But how does that answer M. Amekudzie?” asked Koffi.

Patiently, Esaiiah closed his Bible and removed his reading glasses. As he folded his glasses and placed them inside his shirt pocket, he seemed to be choosing his words very carefully as he spoke. It seemed to Koffi that his uncle Esaiiah was recalling something that he had discussed at length a long time ago. Finally, Esaiiah spoke.

“Koffi, we believe in a God who reveals Himself. You cannot separate the two: first, that there is a God. Second, that the God who exists has made Himself known to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.”



Koffi thought that his uncle Esaiah was on to something, but he knew that M. Amekudzie would not be impressed by this answer.

“But Uncle, could the Muslims say the same thing with their Quran and Jehovah’s Witnesses say the same thing from their New World Translation?” Koffi asked.

“Koffi, the Bible, and I am talking about the Christian Bible, not that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, does something that neither the Quran, nor any other religious text can do. It gives a test for its own reliability and then it proves that test,” replied Esaiah.

Koffi scratched his head. “How, Uncle?”

“The fact that Jesus gave a sign as the proof of who He said He was, that He performed that sign, and that five hundred witnesses testify to what Jesus said and did proves to us that the message of the Bible and the God to whom it testifies is true,” answered Esaiah.

“I’m not sure that I understand,” replied Koffi. What Esaiah was saying sounded convincing, but Koffi wanted to make certain that he understood what exactly his uncle was saying.

Esaiah flipped through the pages of the Bible, looking for the correct passage.

Esaiah answered, “Hear what Jesus said in Matthew 12:38-42, ‘Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You’ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.’”

Esaiah paused, collecting his thoughts.

“Jesus referred to the ‘sign of Jonah’ as the proof that the scribes and the Pharisees wanted to prove that his words had authority. Jesus was referring to

his death, burial, and resurrection. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, so Jesus would die, be buried, and then rise from the grave three days later,” Esaiiah said.

“But Uncle, M. Amekudzie will demand for proof,” replied Koffi.

Once again, Esaiiah put on his glasses and flipped through his Bible, stopping at yet another passage. “1 Corinthians 15:3-6 reads, ‘For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep.’”

Esaiiah set down his Bible. He rubbed his eyes before he began to explain to Koffi.

“Jesus proved that He is God the Son by his death, burial, and resurrection. Five hundred people witnessed this fact and proclaimed it to be the truth. To believe Jesus now is to believe the report and testimony of the five hundred witnesses that has been handed down generation after generation,” Esaiiah said at last.

“So then, the reason why we believe is because Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection were reported by five hundred witnesses?” asked Koffi.

“Exactly!” replied Esaiiah. “The reason why I believe is not because of a miracle that I’ve witnessed, or some preacher healed someone, or because of some emotional experience that I’ve had in a church service. I believe because I have received the testimony of the five hundred witnesses. And their testimony is that we should believe in the God who spoke to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus commands us to repent or turn away from our sin and to believe in Him. If we believe Jesus is who He said He was, and the five hundred witnesses say as much, then we should do what Jesus commands us.”

Koffi slowly nodded, taking in what his Uncle was saying to him. Little by little, what his Uncle was saying seemed to be making a lot of sense. Then a new question formed within him. He hoped that this continual questioning would not try his uncle’s patience.

“But does that prove why I should believe the rest of the Bible and not just why I should believe in Jesus?” Koffi asked.

Koffi expected Uncle Esaiah to frown and express his displeasure in Koffi. Why couldn't he simply accept what his uncle was telling him and end it at that? Koffi always seemed to be the one who questioned more. It served him well in school but at other times it seemed to exasperate some of his friends and family members. But instead of frowning, Koffi saw a broad grin form on Esaiah's face.

“Because to believe that Jesus is who He says He is, as proven by his death, burial, and resurrection, is to believe in His words. Consider, then, Jesus' own words about the Bible. First of all, Jesus said about the Old Testament in Matthew 5:18-19, ‘Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.’”

Esaiah continued, “And Jesus also said at the end of John 10:35, ‘And the Scripture cannot be broken.’ Jesus made claims about who he was, the Son of God. He was the revelation of the Father. As the Son of God, he validated his claim by His death, burial, and resurrection. That means that we should not only accept Him but what He says, which includes confidence in the Bible.”

Koffi then began to understand. “And so, we believe the God of the Bible because the self-revealing God sent Jesus Christ as His revelation to us. And Jesus attested not only to Himself as God the Son, but also in the reliability of the Bible. Jesus proved who He is by dying on the cross and then rising from the dead before appearing to the five hundred witnesses. That not only settled once and for all who Jesus is, but everything God revealed in the Bible. Believing in Jesus means believing in the testimony of the five hundred witnesses.”

Esaiah nodded. “Now you understand,” he affirmed.

“But,” Koffi asked, growing more confident with his questions that his uncle would not grow impatient with him, “Can't Muslims say something similar about Mohammed and the revelations that he received that are now in the Quran?”

“No,” replied Esaiah. “Mohammed, and Mohammed alone, received these revelations in the cave outside Mecca. No one else was present. In order to believe the message of Mohammed, you would have to believe the witness of a solitary individual. That is quite unlike Christianity, in which five hundred people testified that they witnessed Jesus Christ risen from the dead. Besides, the testi-

mony of Mohammed is on shaky ground, anyway. According to the Old Testament, which Muslims accept by the way, Deuteronomy 19:15 says, ‘on the testimony of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.’”

Koffi stood transfixed. “So, you mean that, on the basis of the Old Testament, a book that Muslims uphold, the testimony of Mohammed should be rejected because we only have his testimony and his testimony alone that what he preached came from God?”

“Exactly,” replied Esaiiah.

“And Mohammed did nothing to prove that his revelation was true, unlike Jesus who proved that He was God the Son through his death, burial, and resurrection,” continued Koffi.

“You are beginning to understand why we uphold the God of the Bible,” Esaiiah said.

Koffi became more excited as he spoke, almost jumping up and down. He had believed in Jesus Christ for years. But now, it seemed as if his belief in God and Jesus Christ had grown in that short span of time under the mango tree with his uncle Esaiiah. Koffi did not want this moment to end. He wished that Esaiiah would continue talking with him. It seemed strange that earlier today, Koffi had felt so dejected and unsure of himself. Now, however, his uncle Esaiiah had strengthened his faith and given him the wise counsel from Scripture that Koffi had so desperately needed.

“So many people say that they believe because of a miracle that God performed, or because the Holy Spirit performed some mighty wonder during a church service,” commented Koffi.

“And I won’t reject or question their experience,” replied Esaiiah. “But those kinds of experiences are not the reason why I believe in God and His Son Jesus Christ. I believe in the God of the Bible because of the reality of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as testified by the five hundred witnesses,” Esaiiah said. “That, and that alone, is the basis of why I believe in the God of the Bible.”

“But you haven’t said why we trust in the Protestant Bible and not in the Catholic Bible or the Jehovah’s Witnesses Bible,” Koffi said.

Esaiiah answered, “The Catholic Bible says everything that the Protestant Bible says, only it adds some additional books called the Apocrypha. There is no reason to speak further about the Catholic Bible or the Protestant Bible because all the passages that I mentioned are also found in the Catholic Bible. You can read them yourself in the Catholic Bible of your father’s that your mother keeps still.”

Koffi knew exactly where his mother kept their old Catholic Bible. It was an heirloom that his grandfather had passed down to his father. He wondered if he would receive it from his mother someday. “I will look in it when I speak with Mama,” Koffi answered.

“And concerning the Bible of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, judge for yourself, but all the other Bible translations disagree with what it says. It seems to suggest that Jesus is just an exalted celestial being but is not God Almighty. It corrupts certain passages like John 1:1 and Colossians 1:16-18 when it says, ‘The Word was *a* god’ rather than our Bible that says, ‘The Word was God.’ My question is why nobody else seems to agree with their unique translation. Rather, it seems that the Jehovah’s Witnesses developed a Bible that serves their own purposes,” said Esaiiah.

Koffi wanted to say more, but he knew that he had chores to do that afternoon. He thanked Esaiiah for all that he had shared. Koffi let his uncle return to his repair work under the mango tree and returned his reading glasses and Bible to their place beside his bed inside the house.

## Chapter Two Questions

1. How does the Gospel (the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ) provide the foundation for belief in the God of the Bible?

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2. How does Deuteronomy 19:15 explain a significant weakness in the testimony/revelation found in the Koran as opposed to the Bible concerning its own validity?

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3. If someone tells you the Protestant Bible and the Bible of the Jehovah's Witnesses is the same, what two passages would be helpful to reference? Why are these passages important?

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## CHAPTER 3

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### **DO OTHER RELIGIONS WORSHIP THE SAME GOD AS CHRISTIANS?**

Koffi sat under the mango tree next to his uncle, Esaiiah. He had just finished his chores for the afternoon. As he fed the goats in his extended family's courtyard and washed his school uniform for the next day's class, he could not help but think through what his uncle Esaiiah had told him. But the more he thought, the more he had questions.

Throughout his life, Koffi's family had been Christians. In his early childhood, his father led the family to Mass at the Catholic church every week. Then, after the death of his father, the family joined Harmony Baptist Church and attended services there ever since. But Koffi knew that there were many of his ethnic group, the Ewe, who still practiced their traditional religion. Their type of Vodoun taught that there was one father god, Mawu, along with many lesser gods. Some among his people taught that Africans, including the Ewe, followed one god long before the Christian missionaries came to their lands. They even taught that the one god in their traditional religion was the same god shared by the Muslim and the Christian alike. Koffi wondered what his uncle Esaiiah would say. He looked over at his uncle, who was listening to a program on his shortwave radio sitting on the ground next to him.

"Uncle Esaiiah?" said Koffi. Esaiiah reached over to the shortwave radio and quickly turned down the volume.

Uncle Esaiiah seemed pleased to speak with Koffi again. "Did you say something?" Esaiiah asked.

"I've been wondering, Uncle. Did our ancestors follow the same god as the Christians?" asked Koffi.

"Do you think that they did?" asked Esaiiah.

“Honestly, I don’t know. I mean, Christianity teaches that there is one God. Vodoun says essentially the same thing. What difference does it make if you call him Jehovah or Mawu?” asked Koffi.

Esaiah seemed to think long and hard. Koffi did not know if his uncle was struggling to choose the right words or if he was struggling to say anything at all. So far today, his uncle had given him sound advice. In fact, Koffi had gained a new appreciation for the wisdom his uncle possessed. He sat patiently, waiting to hear what Uncle Esaiah was going to say.

“Does Judaism teach that there is one God, Koffi?” Esaiah asked.

“Yes, Uncle,” replied Koffi.

“Did the Jews follow the same Scripture as the early Christians?” asked Esaiah.

“Yes, of course they did,” answered Koffi.

“Then why did Peter preach to the Jews, specifically at Pentecost if there was no need?” Esaiah asked.

Koffi did not respond. He did not know what to say.

“In John 6:29, Jesus said this to the Jewish leaders, ‘This is the work of God: that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ He also said in Luke 10:16, ‘The one who listens to you listens to Me; the one who rejects you rejects Me; but he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me,’” replied Esaiah.

“So, what does that mean?” asked Koffi.

“It means that a general belief in God is not enough. God spoke to us through Jesus Christ. If we do not accept his message, communicated by his followers who share the testimony of the five hundred witnesses of the resurrected Christ, then we have rejected God who sent Jesus to us in the first place,” answered Esaiah.

“But what if the followers of Mawu are sincere in their beliefs?” asked Koffi.

“Are they?” asked Esaiah.

“Well...they practice so many things with such intensity,” replied Koffi.

“Our standard should not be the emotional force of their worship but what the Bible says about their worship,” answered Esaiah.



“Okay. So, what does it say, then?” asked Koffi.

“Run back inside and bring me by Bible and reading glasses next to my bed,” said Esaiah, handing him the key to his bedroom. Koffi stood and then ran to his uncle’s bedroom. He returned a short time later, carrying both items and handing them to his uncle.

Esaiah put on his glasses and flipped through his Bible before stopping at a passage.

He read aloud, “Romans 1:18-25 says, ‘For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Profession to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.’”

“So then, are you saying that this passage applies to us as the Ewe?” asked Koffi.

“It applies to all people, not just Africans, not just one group, but the whole human race apart from Jesus Christ,” answered Esaiah.

“So then, it doesn’t matter if we say that there is one God, what matters is that we believe in Jesus Christ?” asked Koffi.

“If we don’t believe in Jesus, or even worse, if we outright reject Jesus, we are not only rejecting Him but also God the Father who sent Jesus to us,” answered Esaiah.

“Even if people who worship Mawu do so with sincerity?” asked Koffi.

“Romans 1 tells us that even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God. Their worship is corrupted because it does not acknowledge the

One whom God sent to them. And for that their understanding became darkened, and they began to worship the creature rather than the Creator,” said Esaiiah.

“Like the idols in our traditional religions,” answered Koffi.

“Exactly. Look at all of the lesser gods and the ancestral spirits that the followers of Vodoun follow. Some argue that they don’t worship them but only Mawu. But that is not entirely true. They pray to them, they make offerings to them, sometimes they will even sacrifice a cock to receive protection or blessings from one of them. All these actions suggest that these followers have placed their faith in these minor gods and ancestral spirits. But God has said in Exodus 20:2 and in Deuteronomy 5:6, ‘You shall have no other gods before Me,’” said Esaiiah.

Koffi nodded his head. What his uncle was telling him seemed to answer many of the questions that he had.

“So then, we must obey God and follow Jesus Christ. Anything else is idolatry and is considered false religion,” Koffi summarized.

“You have spoken well,” Esaiiah affirmed.

“That is why, in Acts 4:12, Peter said to the Jewish religious leaders, who themselves proclaimed that there is only one God: ‘And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved,’” continued Esaiiah.

Koffi stopped and allowed what Esaiiah was saying to sink in. Suddenly, a new question came to mind.

“But then, that would mean that all of our prior generations of ancestors would go to hell since they did not believe in Jesus Christ,” Koffi said.

“That is something that is difficult to accept, isn’t it?” asked Esaiiah.

Koffi nodded. It really did not seem fair at all. Why is it that some people knew about Christianity for over a thousand years while others only received the Christian faith since the last century? Where was the justice in that?

Esaiiah reached into his shirt pocket and took out a kola nut. Biting off a small piece, he chewed slowly. Knowing that kola nut has very high caffeine content, Koffi wondered why his uncle was chewing some in the late afternoon. Perhaps his uncle believed that he would be speaking much longer than during the afternoon. Then Esaiiah drew a deep breath before he spoke.

“Do you believe that God is just, Koffi?” asked Esaiah.

“Yes, I do,” answered Koffi.

“Do you also believe that God is merciful and gracious toward us?” continued Esaiah.

“You know that I do, Uncle,” replied Koffi.

“And I assume that you also recognize that all humankind is sinful?” Esaiah asked.

“I was taught in Sunday School that Romans 3:23 says that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,’” Koffi answered.

“Indeed, and Scripture also says in Psalm 14:3, ‘No one is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God,’” replied Esaiah.

“I guess that would apply even to our ancestors,” said Koffi.

“It applies to the whole world,” returned Esaiah.

“So, what does that mean for those generations who died without knowing about Christianity?” asked Koffi.

“It means that if we accept and believe in the justice and graciousness of God as well as the reality of the utter sinfulness of all humanity, we are asking the wrong question if we ask how God can send anybody to hell. The real question that we should be asking is, ‘why does God bother to save anybody at all?’” answered Esaiah.

Koffi did not say anything. He still felt like that answer seemed to be rather harsh.

“Don’t think for a second that there are these people who are genuinely seeking God, only they haven’t heard who Jesus is yet. Then, before anybody comes to tell them anything at all, they reach the end of their lifespan and that’s the end. They would have believed, only they just didn’t know. The truth is that nobody is truly seeking God. It is only when the light of the Gospel touches their hearts that people respond in grace to the message and believe. Even the preaching of the message itself is an act of God’s grace. All of our salvation is of grace. To imply that it is unfair for certain people who have never believed is to question God’s fairness. Only, we shouldn’t ask God for fairness. Otherwise, we’d all be in hell,” Esaiah said.

Illumination seemed to dawn in Koffi's understanding. At least, he was starting to understand what the gospel message really was about. How blind he had been to the idea that salvation was really about God's grace!

"So then, we should praise God for His mercy that He saved us rather than demanding why He hasn't saved everybody that we think deserved to be saved," Koffi mused.

"That is exactly right. What it also tells us is that if we know that people cannot be saved until they have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and repented or turned away from their sin, then we should be proclaiming the gospel at every opportunity that comes to us," Esaiiah said.

"It's not just the job of the pastor, the evangelist, or the missionary," Koffi said. He remembered his Royal Ambassadors training every Wednesday night at Harmony Baptist Church that he had attended in his younger years.

"So then, the answer that I would give to anyone who asks about our traditional religion is that Romans 10:13, 'whoever calls upon the name of the LORD will be saved,' and Acts 4:12 says that 'there is no other name under heaven given unto men by which they may be saved,' which is Jesus Christ. He said about himself in John 14:6 says, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me.' Then I would invite them to believe by referencing 2 Corinthians 6:2, 'Behold, now is the appointed time, today is the day of salvation. And also cite Romans 10:9, that 'if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved,'" Esaiiah taught.

Koffi had heard all of this before. Now that he was almost eighteen, he had been attending baptism class at Harmony Baptist Church, anticipating the day in which Pastor Emmanuel would baptize him and the church recognized him as a confessing believer and member of the congregation. Somehow, hearing all of it again through his uncle Esaiiah made the message all the more living and real to him. This message spoke to Koffi. He began to realize that what he was hearing was not just for the Sunday school classroom but had real-world implications for everyday life, including his classes with M. Amekudzic.

*"Ach! I still have to prepare my assignment for M. Amekudzic tonight!"* thought Koffi. But he was enjoying his time with his uncle Esaiiah that Koffi did not want the moment to end. He wished that he could keep talking into the evening.

“So do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?” Koffi asked. Though he knew that he would have to start on his homework assignment soon, he tried to extend his time with his uncle.

“What do you think?” asked Esaiah.

Koffi thought hard. He wanted to show his uncle that he was trying to come up with a good answer.

“I would start by saying that both believe in one God and in Him alone,” began Koffi.

“Is that all?” asked Esaiah.

“No. Like our traditional religions or even like Judaism, believing in one God does not go far enough,” replied Koffi.

“Good! Anything else?” inquired Esaiah.

Koffi scrunched his nose, thinking hard to develop the response that he wanted to give to his uncle. It seemed like his uncle had opened a sieve and now the water was beginning to pour. At last, Koffi found the words that he wanted to say.

“Both believe in Jesus. But, while Christianity teaches that Jesus is God the Son, Islam says that Jesus was only a prophet, and an inferior prophet to Mohammed at that,” answered Koffi.

“So, what does that mean?” asked Esaiah.

“I suppose that would mean that the Jesus proclaimed by the Muslim imam is completely different from the Jesus of the Bible,” replied Koffi.

“Go on,” urged Esaiah.

“It would then mean that when Jesus said that the will of the One who sent Him was that we believe in Him whom He has sent, it would mean believing that Jesus is God the Son, sent by God the Father,” answered Koffi.

“What else?” asked Esaiah.

“Since Muslims reject the idea that Jesus is God the Son, the god that they follow is completely different from the God of the Bible,” Koffi thought.

Esaiah clapped his hands. The other family members looked up from what they were doing and smiled at the two of them sitting under the mango tree. They knew that something had been troubling Koffi since he had returned

home from school this afternoon. It had become apparent to them that his uncle Esaiiah was helping Koffi think through his problem. Now Koffi felt a little embarrassed at the realization that his conversation with his uncle had drawn spectators inside the courtyard.

“You are not only just quoting Bible verses to me, Koffi, but you are starting to think through what they really mean for your daily life. It is just like when God commanded Ezekiel and later the Apostle John to eat the scroll that had God’s word written down. We have to do more than Psalm 34:8, which is to ‘taste and see that the LORD is good.’ We have to feast upon the Word that is given to us from above. And you are starting to do just that!” Esaiiah beamed.

Koffi grinned. He could tell his uncle was genuinely proud of him. He wished that it would be so easy with M. Amekudzie. Something told Koffi that no matter how well his answers were worded during class tomorrow, M. Amekudzie would not be satisfied unless he heard what he wanted to hear. And Koffi knew that he could not take the path that M. Amekudzie had chosen for his life. While his uncle Esaiiah did not have all the education that M. Amekudzie did, his quiet manner and his wisdom with handling Scripture endeared him even further to Koffi.

“When I am older, I want to be like my uncle,” thought Koffi.

“Discussions about religion can grow more complicated than we ever dreamed,” Koffi said aloud.

“But these are no mere small discussions, Koffi,” replied Esaiiah.

“I realize that they affect our worship and belief,” answered Esaiiah.

“Not only that, but what we believe about God will affect what we know and believe about ourselves,” said Esaiiah.

“In what way?” Koffi asked.

“Let’s get some chairs and talk business further.” Koffi helped his uncle to place some folding chairs under the mango tree.

“This is going to be good!” thought Koffi.

## Chapter Three Questions

1. Do you wonder if members of other religions worship the same God as Evangelical Christians? Why is this not true?

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2. How would you respond to someone who says that it is unfair and unjust if God does not allow sincere members of other religions to enter into heaven? Are they correct? Why or why not?

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3. Why is it not enough to say that you believe in only One Supreme God? What must you also believe?

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## CHAPTER 4

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### **HOW IS GOD COMPLETELY BEYOND OUR UNDERSTANDING?**

Koffi had been so captivated in his conversation with his uncle Esaiah that he did not notice how other family members had been craning their necks to overhear the conversation. But Esaiah had noticed that others in the courtyard were straining to hear the dialogue that was taking place between him and his nephew. Esaiah turned and directed his grandchildren, nephews, and nieces to fetch chairs and to arrange them in a circle around the mango tree.

Koffi saw his aunt Marie-Noëlle and his cousin Phillipe arrange chairs and sit on one side. On the opposite side, his sister was finishing her work arranging her client's hair and had taken a seat. Her client had asked if she could sit and listen to the dialogue taking place between Esaiah and Koffi. Koffi's brothers and sisters sat on the ground or stood nearby, listening to what Esaiah would say next.

Koffi decided that he wanted to resume the discussion that he had been having with his uncle Esaiah. He cleared his throat, wondering what he should ask next. His uncle Esaiah seemed to be a deep well of wisdom. Koffi hoped that he could continue to keep the process going. What Esaiah had said near the end of their last discussion raised a question in Koffi's thoughts. He decided that he had to ask what his uncle meant.

"Uncle Esaiah, you mentioned that what we believe about God will affect what we know and believe about ourselves. What did you mean?" Koffi asked.

"Two things, Koffi," Esaiah replied. "First of all, what we believe about God will determine how we believe He relates to us and who we are in this world in relation to Him."

Koffi nodded. "And secondly?" he asked.

Esaiah continued, "The Bible tells us in Genesis 1 that people are created in the image of God."

“Those words have always confused me. Does that mean that God looks like a man with eyes, a nose, hands, and feet?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

Koffi waited to hear how his uncle Esaiiah would answer that question. He did not believe that the phrase “image of God,” meant what Marie-Noëlle suggested, but he had no idea how to respond to her question. He wondered how Esaiiah would answer.

“No, Marie-Noëlle, I don’t think that the phrase, ‘image of God’ is referring to a physical body. Nor do I think that God has arms and legs, fingers, and toes,” replied Esaiiah. “Remember what Jesus said to the woman at the well in John 4: ‘God is Spirit.’”

“So then, what does ‘image of God’ really mean then?” asked Koffi’s cousin, Philippe. Koffi was wondering the same thing; Philippe had beaten him to the question.

“The image of God refers to how human beings reflect God’s nature and character. We show, in a limited way, how God relates to his creation. That is what is meant by the image of God,” answered Esaiiah.

Koffi then asked, “But you mentioned that what we believe about God will affect what we think and believe about ourselves. How does the image of God do that?”

“If we believe that people are created in God’s image, and we know some things about God, that should affect how we live and act in this world before God, how we treat one another, and how we act in this world,” answered Esaiiah.

“That makes sense,” said Koffi. “Only, what do we know about God that tells us something about ourselves?”

Everyone seemed to listen intently for Esaiiah’s answer. The silence among everyone in the circle was noticeable.

“First, how much about God that we will perhaps never understand or realize,” replied Esaiiah.

The entire group seemed to be stunned by Esaiiah’s answer. Some even shook their heads and made a clicking noise with their tongues to indicate their frustration with his response to Koffi’s question. Koffi himself felt deflated.

“But why is that true and, if it is so, how does that benefit us?” asked Philippe, his dismay distinctly audible in his voice.

Patiently, Esaiiah began to explain his answer. “Understand that God is infinite. His infinity extends beyond time but also to space. With regard to time, is there ever a moment when God was not?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Rightly so. Psalm 90:2 says ‘Before the mountains were born, or you gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.’ So then, we are agreed that God is infinite with regard to time?”

Again, everyone nodded. Koffi was impatient to know where his uncle was taking this line of questioning. But Esaiiah took his time and slowly continued to explain by referring to Scripture.

“We must also acknowledge that God is infinite with regard to space as well. Concerning space, is there a place where we can go and know that God is not there?” asked Esaiiah.

Again, everyone sitting in the circle around Esaiiah and Koffi shook their heads.

Esaiiah smiled and said, “You have answered well. Once again, Psalm 139:7-12 reads, ‘Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You.’ So then, God is infinite with regard to space; there is nowhere in which God is not.”

“And what does all of that mean about us not knowing most of what there is about God? And how does any of this matter at all to us?” asked Koffi’s sister Beatrice.

Esaiiah immediately replied, “It means everything. First, are we present at all times and all places?”

Again, everyone sitting in the circle shook their heads. Esaiiah smiled again in response.

“I agree and so does the Bible. So then, I ask you, how can someone who is finite ever hope to know and understand everything that there is to know about someone who is infinite?” asked Esaiiah.

The entire group remained silent. Nobody seemed to have an answer.

“You are talking about what seems to be unknowable. Of course, God is a mystery to us in so many ways. Only how can what we do not know anything about help us to know anything at all? This entire subject seems like we are going in circles!” complained Philippe.

Once again, Esaiiah smiled patiently and began to speak. Koffi marveled at his patience and his willingness to respond to so many questions.

“Acknowledging that there will always be more about God that we may never know or understand actually tells us many things, both about God Himself, and also about us. First of all, this fact tells us that God is God and that we are not,” replied Esaiiah.

“That is not very hard to understand,” Philippe retorted.

“Oh, but how easily we seem to forget!” Esaiiah responded. “When we understand how infinite God is and how finite we are, it should elevate our worship. We recognize that God is worthy of our praises because He surpasses all that we can ever know or understand about Him.”

“Which tells us how little we really are and just how big God is,” affirmed Koffi.

Esaiiah nodded his head excitedly. “Yes, Koffi. Exactly right!”

“I guess it also reminds us that God is the Creator and we are the creature. The creature cannot be equal to, or greater than, his own Creator. If that were so, then God would not be worthy of our worship,” said Marie-Noëlle thoughtfully.

“Which means that there must always be something about the Creator that can never be known. If we could know everything there was to know about God, then He would not really be God nor would He deserve our worship,” said Koffi.

Esaiiah clapped his hands in excitement and celebration. “You do well, Koffi,” he said.

Koffi smiled briefly. He felt like this afternoon discussion that had begun with just him and his uncle and now included most of the courtyard had encouraged him to grow in ways that he had never dreamed. His uncle Esaiah had been the adult men's Sunday school teacher for as long as Koffi could remember. How Koffi wished that he could sit in that class now, realizing for the first time how much Esaiah understood.

“How ironic is it, that the first part of knowing any wisdom of God is to know how much that we will never know about Him in the first place. It is like a riddle!” acknowledged Esaiah. He, too, seemed to be enjoying this discussion as much as Koffi and the rest of the courtyard residents were.

## Chapter Four Questions

1. What does it mean to be created in the image of God? How does this affect the way we treat others?

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2. Does the fact of God's immensity mean we can know nothing of God? What does Hebrews 1:1-2 say in regard to God's revelation?

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3. How does understanding how infinite God is and how finite we are help our worship?

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4. Why is it an utter contradiction for somebody to say that any knowledge of God is absolutely impossible?

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## CHAPTER 5

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### HOW IS GOD DIFFERENT THAN US?

As the extended family in the courtyard were sitting in silent reflection in the courtyard, Koffi's mom entered the area, carrying plates of hot, steaming food and putting one in uncle Esaiah's hands and his own. Koffi's younger siblings also emerged, serving the other adults. Koffi's mother and some other family members had apparently been preparing dinner behind the house while the discussion had transpired.

Everyone was eating the same meal: ground maize covered with a mashed okra sauce. Esaiah prayed a communal blessing over the meal before plunging his hand into the steaming mass and sampling a morsel. Koffi joined his uncle in eating his dinner, mulling over the discussion that they had this afternoon. The others joined Koffi and Esaiah in silently eating their dinner. Family members passed small, plastic bags of PurWater to each member of the circle. Like the others, Koffi finished eating his meal before he bit off a corner of his bag, spat out the plastic between his teeth on the ground, raised the bag and started gulping down the contents.

As the younger children took everyone's plates and carried them to a tub filled with soapy water for washing, Esaiah leaned back in his seat. The others began to sit back as well.

*"Do I continue my questions, or not?"* wondered Koffi. As much as he had enjoyed this afternoon with his uncle, Koffi did not wish to bother him or the rest of the family in the courtyard. The evening was upon them; Koffi knew that eventually he would have to prepare his response to M. Amekudzie.

"Do you have more that you want to ask me, Koffi?" Esaiah asked.

The rest of the family members were quiet. It seemed that everyone was eager to see how Koffi would respond to his uncle's question. Koffi was glad that his uncle seemed to be eager to continue.

“Uncle, you told us about how there is more about God that we don’t know or, perhaps may never know than what we do know,” began Koffi.

“Yes,” answered Esaiiah.

“So then, what are those things about God that we can know, at least, something about him?” asked Koffi.

“Of course, there must be some things that we can know about God, or else we never would be able to have any discussion about Him at all,” replied Esaiiah.

“So then, what do we know, and where should we even start?” asked Koffi.

“There are so many different ways that we can talk about One who really is bigger than all of us,” answered Esaiiah. “But I think that we should begin by discussing all the ways that the Bible tells us that God is not like us.”

“And you are assuming again that there are ways that God is both like us and unlike us?” asked Koffi.

“Of course. We discussed this matter earlier when we talked about how human beings are created in the image of God,” Esaiiah said.

Koffi nodded his head in remembrance of their previous discussion.

“And again, why are we starting with how God is unlike us?” Philippe asked.

“I think that it is important to start with knowing and worshipping God what a big God he really is before we begin to identify those ways that we are like Him and He is like us,” answered Esaiiah.

The group in the circle murmured their assent to Esaiiah’s words.

“So then,” Koffi asked, “how is God completely unlike us?”

“There are probably more ways that God is unlike us than we can count,” began Esaiiah, “but I believe that we can start with three ways that God is completely unlike us: how God is completely independent from anything and anyone, that God does not change, and God’s infinity, which we discussed briefly earlier.”

The extended family listened intently, knowing that Esaiiah was about to teach them more.

“What do you mean by God being ‘independent,’” asked Marie-Noëlle.



“God’s independence means that God does not require anything to sustain Him or to enable Him to continue existing,” answered Eisaiah.

“And how is that different from us?” asked Philippe, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think that I understand.”

Eisaiah smiled before he explained. “Philippe, what are some basic essentials that all people need if they are to continue living? Or, what would possibly cause them to suffer and possibly die without them?” asked Eisaiah.

Philippe answered, “Well, I suppose that we all need food, clothing, and shelter.”

Eisaiah nodded, “Yes, indeed. In fact, we all grow hungry by the end of the day if we have not eaten. In fact, we would prefer to eat not just one big meal at the end of the day but two or more meals if we can,” he said.

Philippe continued, “Besides modesty, we need clothing to provide some protection against the elements. Otherwise, our feet are exposed to sharp objects and the filth along the roadside. And during the rainy season, a jacket or some kind of covering against the heavy rainfall.”

“You speak well. And I imagine that we require some kind of shelter for the same reason, then?” asked Eisaiah.

Philippe nodded.

Koffi then added, “We also need air to breathe and sunlight to warm us.”

“But God is not like that as we see in Scripture. Simply, God *is*. That is what is meant in Exodus 3:14 when it says, ‘I AM that I AM.’”

“That sounds so vague,” countered Philippe. “Are you sure that is what it really means?”

“Of course, I think that this passage talks about far more than we can discuss this evening,” replied Eisaiah. “However, one important thing that it is saying is that God *is*, that He lives and moves without being dependent on anything in order for Him to continue.”

“Does the Bible say anything else that is, maybe, easier for us to understand what it means?” asked Koffi. He believed what his uncle was saying about this Scripture passage. However, he wanted Philippe to have what he believed was a more satisfactory answer.

“Of course, there is also Psalm 50:10-11,” replied Esaiah. Flipping through the pages of his Bible, Esaiah began to read from the selected passage, “For every beast of the forest is Mine; the cattle of a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and every beast that moves in the field is Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all it contains,” read Esaiah.

“So then, does God eat?” asked Philippe.

“I don’t think that is the point,” replied Koffi. “I think that the Bible is expressing a truth about God that is expressed in a way that makes it easier for us to understand.”

Esaiah nodded his agreement. “It is as Koffi has said,” he responded.

Koffi continued, “So then, what you are telling us is that God lives and moves apart from requiring anything at all to sustain Him. He simply *is*. He does not need anything to support him or sustain Him. God is independent from everything else.”

“Which is completely different from us,” acknowledged Marie-Noëlle. “We *need* things in order to continue living. Without air to breathe, without food and water, without a place to live and clothes to wear, we will eventually die.”

“Which is why we should worship God,” affirmed Esaiah, “because He is so unlike us, indeed, greater than us, that the only correct response from us to this truth is to bow and worship Him because He is greater than anything that we can possibly imagine!”

Koffi’s mind began to race. He began to consider the other two ways that Esaiah mentioned how God is completely unlike human beings. An insight suddenly came to him.

“And so, if God does not need anything to sustain him, that is why God does not change. He always stays the same throughout eternity,” Koffi said.

Esaiah cocked his head to one side, mulling over what Koffi had suggested. He seemed to be considering what Koffi had just said. He then nodded and grinned.

“I had not thought of it that way before, but I think that you are right, Koffi,” Esaiah said. “We grow by consuming that for which we are dependent. We change and adapt. But God does not change. In addition to being independent, He is eternal. I would say that because God is independent and because

He is eternal are the two reasons that God does not change,” Esaiiah said at last. Clearly, uncle Esaiiah was considering ideas for the first time. He did not appear to feel threatened by others posing questions or presenting new ideas to him. Rather, Esaiiah seemed to relish the discussion and the new insights that others had.

“Have we not descended into speculation now,” asked Philippe. He seemed flustered by the discussion that had just recently ensued. “What does the Bible say about God not changing? How do you know this?” he asked.

“You make a good point, Philippe,” Esaiiah said. “Here, let me find the passage in my Bible. I think that you will find plenty of biblical examples. Ah, here we are,” Esaiiah said at last before he began to quote the passage from Scripture.

“Malachi 3:6 says, ‘For I, the LORD, do not change. Therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed,’” read Esaiiah. “But that is not all. Let us consider another passage that talks about how God does not change,” added Esaiiah.

He continued, flipping through his Bible as he searched the passage, “Psalm 102:25-27 also says, ‘Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them, and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end.’”

As Esaiiah concluded, he looked at Philippe. “That also explains why I affirmed that God does not change because he is eternal. That was not speculation but something that I took directly from Scripture. We had not arrived yet at the biblical support for that idea. I’m trying to show everything slowly for everyone to keep up,” explained Esaiiah.

Philippe seemed embarrassed by the way that he hung his head and would not look directly at Esaiiah. But he said nothing. Esaiiah had not shown any anger or frustration on his part. He seemed only to explain to Philip why he had followed the path that he did. But Koffi wanted to know more. It seemed like these passages that his uncle had cited had not answered all of his questions.

“Uncle Esaiiah, if God does not change, then why does He change His mind to destroy the Israelites after Moses intercedes on their behalf?” asked Koffi.

Esaiiah beamed when Koffi asked this question. “Aha! You must be referring to Exodus 32:9-14 and Deuteronomy 9:13-14,” he replied.

In point of fact, Koffi did not know that there were two times in which Moses had implored God not to destroy His people. Koffi also did not know where the passage was in the Old Testament. He had simply remembered discussing it in Sunday school class sometime last year or so. He wondered how Esaiiah would respond to this question. Evidently, he had anticipated it by the way that he had reacted to Koffi's question.

"Let's read the passages aloud, first," he replied. Flipping through his Bible, he turned to Exodus 32:9-14 and read, "The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.' Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" So, the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people."

Esaiiah flipped through his Bible again. "Allow me to read the other passage so that we can be certain to have covered everything," he explained. Finding the passage at last, Esaiiah began to read to himself, "Deuteronomy 9:13-14 is a retelling of that event by Moses shortly before his death and the people of Israel march into the Promised Land," he explained.

Esaiiah continued, "Koffi, what you asked about these passages is an excellent question. But I think that the best way to answer your question is by asking you some questions. First of all, why do you think that God changed in these passages?"

Everyone in the circle turned and looked at Koffi. Koffi swallowed, then proceeded, "Well, the fact that God had promised to do something and then later changed His mind and did the opposite," he answered.

Esaiah nodded, then spoke, “But did God really change, or did the people change? Since there was a response to God’s intention, did that not show a change in the people rather than God?” Esaiah asked.

Koffi shook his head. “I’m afraid that I don’t understand.”

“What would have happened, do you think, if Moses had not interceded and the people continued to live in their disobedience?” asked Esaiah.

“I suppose that God would have destroyed them,” answered Koffi.

“I agree with you,” affirmed Esaiah. “Now, let me ask you, the fact that Moses interceded before God, was that a change in Moses’ heart and actions?”

“I guess so,” replied Koffi.

“I think that it was,” replied Esaiah. “So then, do you think that we could say that it is better to explain all of this as not so much that God changed but that the attitudes and the hearts of His people changed. God in His nature and purpose never changed. But the repentance of His people changed His holy response to their actions,” Esaiah explained.

“That explains a lot,” Koffi said at last.

The rest of the extended family did not say anything. By their silence and the fact that nobody moved, Koffi could tell that they were listening and learning as much as they could from the dialogue between Koffi and his uncle Esaiah.

Koffi spoke again. “So then, Uncle, we have been understanding how God is totally unlike us in three significant ways. First, you have explained how God is independent of anything for Himself to continue to exist. Second, you have also explained how God does not change because He is eternal.”

“Yes, that has been what we have discussed so far,” Esaiah affirmed.

“So then, can we revisit the infinity of God?” Koffi asked. He knew that there was much more to be discussed on this topic than what their brief discussion had covered.

Esaiah smiled and asked, “Shouldn’t you be starting on your assignment for M. Amekudzie?”

Koffi looked down while the rest of the circle of extended family chuckled. “Uncle, I am learning so much right here and right now, I am actually learning

what to say to M. Amekudzie by talking with you and continuing this discussion,” Koffi responded.

Esaiah relented, then said, “We can continue if you like, but everyone else can leave if they have other matters to attend to.” Nobody moved. In fact, they seemed to be enjoying this discussion as much as Koffi. All likewise benefited from Esaiah’s knowledge of the Bible and his wisdom in explaining its meaning and contents to Koffi’s and others’ questions.

“Very well,” he said. “Let us now discuss God’s infinity.”

“First of all, remember what we said about how God’s infinity extends beyond time and also to space. With regard to time, I had asked if there ever a moment when God was not. We had rightly concluded that no such time had ever existed. Psalm 90:2 says that ‘Before the mountains were born, or you gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.’ So then, we concluded that God is infinite with regard to time,” Esaiah explained.

“Next, we discussed God’s infinity with regard to space. Concerning space, I had asked if there was a place where we can go and know that God is not there. You answered correctly that no such place exists. Once again, we read from Psalm 139:7-12 which reads, ‘Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You.’ So then, God is infinite with regard to space; there is nowhere in which God is not,” Esaiah recounted.

“We have heard all this before,” said Philippe. He seemed ready to learn more and was growing impatient. Koffi wished that he would be more kind to his uncle.

Esaiah did not act disturbed by Philippe’s gruffness at all. “You are correct. I merely wanted to remind everybody where we have been before we begin to cover new territory. So then, what do we learn from God’s infinity, besides the fact that it teaches us that He is God and that we are not?” Esaiah asked them.

The circle remained silent.

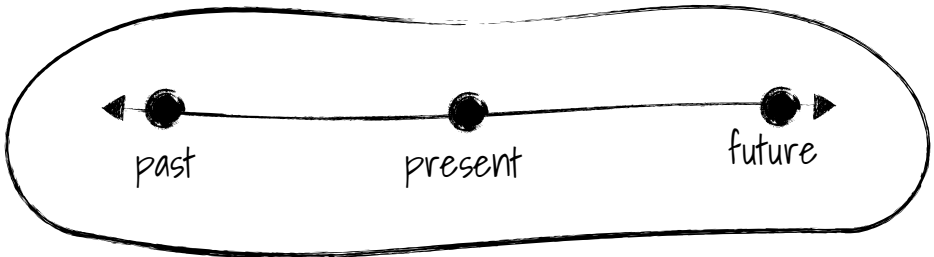
Esaiah waited a long time, hoping that somebody would answer his question. When it became evident that nobody would dare respond, he opened his mouth and began to speak.

“First of all, we learn that because God is infinite with regard to time, He is eternal and therefore not bound by time. He is present at all times simultaneously: past, present, and future, ‘You God, see me.’”

Koffi had not once considered time in this way. Wasn’t time something that we all lived inside? He was trying to understand exactly what his uncle Esaiah was telling them. This truth, however, seemed to surpass everyone’s understanding.

“Perhaps an illustration may be in order, Uncle,” Koffi suggested.

Esaiah nodded, picked up a twig that one of the kids had been playing with earlier that afternoon in the courtyard, and began to draw lines in the dirt in the middle of the circle that had formed around him and Koffi.



“This drawing represents time from God’s perspective. Look at this line, which represents events from the past, present, and the future. Notice that I have circled the timeline. That is how God sees the entirety of the history of our world. Past, present, future,” Esaiah snapped his fingers loudly, “All occur at the same moment in God’s perspective,” Esaiah explained.

Koffi felt as if his brain had just exploded from the profundity of what Uncle Esaiah had just explained to them. Of course, he had believed that God was eternal. However, his understanding of eternity meant endless duration, not that of a God who was timeless, in fact, standing outside of time itself.

“So, what does that mean for us?” asked Philippe.

“It means that when we pray about the future, which may look uncertain for us, it has certainly not taken God by surprise,” explained Esaiiah. “In fact, God already knows what we are going to pray before we ever open our mouths. Time itself is completely under the control of God who stands outside of time.”

“Which makes me wonder why pray at all then,” wondered Marie-Noëlle.

“No, rather it should make us all the more ready to pray, knowing that God is already aware of what we need, what we shall ask, and how He will act in time to make provision for us,” answered Esaiiah.

“And then, that means that God’s infinity with regard to space works the same way,” said Koffi excitedly. “If God exists in all times simultaneously, He also exists in all places. We know that God is aware of everything that happens in every place because God’s presence is everywhere at the same moment.”

Koffi saw his uncle smile briefly as he nodded his head. “Yes, Koffi, that is exactly right. God’s infinity in time and space is a comfort to us when we pray. We know that he is present at every time and at every place. There is nothing that happens outside of His awareness.”



## Chapter Five Questions

1. What does the knowledge of certain attributes of God that are totally unlike us mean for you? About God and His relation to His creation?

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2. How is it that we even know about God's qualities that are completely unlike us and the rest of creation? Can we determine these qualities or explain them on our own?

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3. What does God's independence mean? How is that different than us?

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4. How would you explain that God does not change when someone asks you about Exodus 32:9-14?

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## CHAPTER 6

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### HOW ARE WE LIKE GOD MORALLY?

Once again, the circle fell silent, considering everything that the group had discussed up to the present moment. Koffi wanted to continue the discussion, but also realized that the rest of his extended family, like himself, needed time mentally to digest all that Esaiah had been teaching them. For himself, Koffi felt like he was learning more this late afternoon/early evening than he would an entire week in school.

Finally, after waiting a good ten minutes, Koffi summoned the courage to resume the discussion.

“Uncle,” he said, “how then is God like us? You said that God is like us because we are created in His image. What is that like?”

Esaiah stared ahead and did not answer for a time. Finally, he spoke.

“God is like us in a number of ways. I believe that it is important to discuss how we are like God morally and in how we mirror the way that God thinks,” Esaiah said.

“What do you mean that we are like God morally?” asked Philippe. Koffi wondered the same thing but did not speak. Inwardly, he was glad that Philippe had voiced the same question that he was asking as well.

“Stated simply, all people share a set of morals that govern how we should move and act in this world and among others. All peoples have a code that defines what is acceptable behavior and what is not. This quality did not originate from us. Rather, we reflect the nature of our Creator who planted that quality within us,” Esaiah explained slowly.

Philippe objected, “But how can that be, when we see the corruption in national governments, tribal conflicts, theft, and murder? Is that part of God’s nature?”

Esaiah shook his head, “Of course not Philippe. The fact that you rightly point out the immorality of those actions reveals that you bear the stamp of

God's moral nature and character. Without it, you could not make that moral evaluation in the first place," he said.

Esaiah continued, "What you are asking about concerns the reality of sin, or disobedience to God. And all humanity are sinners. What you are asking about goes beyond what we are discussing right now. But you should know that what is right and moral is greater than what is evil. If it were not so, you would not sense that something was not right, that something was broken. The good could not be greater if we did not have that notion that things are not what they are supposed to be. Otherwise, we would celebrate catastrophe, death, and tragedy rather than what promotes unity, health, and wholeness."

Philippe remained silent. Apparently, Esaiah had spoken enough for him.

"So, what is an example of how God is like us, Uncle?" Koffi asked. He wanted the conversation to get back on track. He was afraid that too many deviations would prevent the rest of the circle from hearing all that his uncle Esaiah wanted to tell them.

Esaiah looked at Koffi before saying, "The first, and most important, is love, Koffi."

Admittedly, Koffi was thinking about God's might or His power, not love. But then, Esaiah's answer seemed to make sense.

"And we love others, like our family and members of our village, which means that we are like God when we love," answered Marie-Noëlle.

"Exactly right," answered Esaiah.

"But do we know what love really is?" asked Koffi.

"To know what love really is, we should turn again to the Bible," answered Esaiah. "And the first thing that we know about the Bible, is that love is eternal because love is God; that is love embodies His nature and His character. Love is who God is. Without that understanding, you do not really know God or who He is," Esaiah explained.

"I guess that is why John tells us, 'God is love,'" replied Marie-Noëlle.

Esaiah read, "I John 4:7-8 reads, 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.' Then later, in verse sixteen, John says again, 'God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him.'"

Philippe, considering everything that the rest of the family were discussing, said at last, “The fact that the Christian God is love sounds so different from the father god of Vodoun (voodoo) or our other traditional religions.”

Esaiah beamed at Philippe, pleased with what he had said. “Exactly, Philippe. In our traditional religious understanding, we have to fight against two ideas that are contrary to the nature of the Christian God, the God in which I believe,” he said.

“In our traditional understanding, the father god is sometimes portrayed as being aloof or distant, reserved from his creatures. That is why those who still follow our traditional worship make offerings to the spirits of their ancestors or give offerings to minor gods or spirits. The hope is that one of them will do something that will give them the power to overcome the lack of money, or grow their business, give them a husband, or provide children,” said Esaiah.

“You said that there were two ideas that are contrary to the nature of God,” said Koffi. “What is the second?”

“The second is the way that we look at god and his relationship with us. Unlike the God of the Bible, our traditional beliefs tell us that the father god has a transactional relationship with us. What that means is, if we do something for the father god that pleases him, he will do something good for us. The point is to do things that will win the favor of the father god so that we will have a blessed life and gain power over this chaotic world that sends so much against us,” explained Esaiah.

“Does Allah in Islam do better, or at least as well as the God of the Bible?” asked Philippe.

“In truth, no. The rigid belief in one God presents a strong, authoritarian character. This ruler deity is so demanding. In fact, the very name for the Muslim’s religion, Islam, itself means, ‘surrender,’ in Arabic,” explained Esaiah. Koffi remembered that there were some distant relations within the family who had converted to Islam after they had married Muslim husbands. It was the subject of much grief to his Uncle Esaiah. But Koffi knew that Esaiah had never said anything harsh or condemning to these family members. In fact, he had reached out to them and had invited them to family gatherings.

“But why is that so?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“Because Islam does not teach how love is part of God’s nature or character in the same way as the God of the Bible,” answered Esaiah.

“But what else does the Bible say besides, ‘God is love,’” asked Philippe. “How can we tell people why God is love?”

“To begin with, we have already mentioned that I John 4:7-8 and verse sixteen say that God is love. That should cause us to ask how God is love for all eternity since we have not always been around. How can God be loving without somebody to love? How can we say that God is loving for all eternity?” asked Esaiiah.

The circle of extended family members sat in silence. Esaiiah was asking them questions that they had never stopped to consider before. Most, if not all of them, did not even know how to respond to this question. Koffi thought that he knew the answer to his uncle’s question, but he was not certain. He considered it to be wiser to sit and wait to hear what his uncle Esaiiah was going to say.

“God is love in his basic nature and character for all eternity because of the Godhead or what Christians call the ‘Trinity,’” Esaiiah explained.

“What do you mean?” asked Koffi.

“Consider John 3:35, when Jesus says that ‘The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand,’ said Esaiiah. “Then, Jesus, as I Corinthians 15:24 says, ‘Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and authority and power,’ and then again in verse twenty-eight, the Bible says, ‘When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son also will be subjected to the One who has subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all,” read Esaiiah.

“So, what you are saying, then,” said Koffi, “is that God is love because for all eternity He exists in a loving relationship among the Persons of the Trinity?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I am saying,” answered Esaiiah.

“That just sounds more confusing,” blurted Philippe. “I mean, you say that Christians worship one God but now you are talking like there are multiple Persons. This doesn’t make any sense!”

Esaiiah patiently turned to Philippe and smiled at him before saying, “It does sound like I am contradicting myself, doesn’t it, Philippe?” Esaiiah said. “Later on, we should explain what we mean when we say that God exists as the Trinity. That is a later discussion. For now, for the sake of our discussion, let’s be content with acknowledging that there is one God, and one God only, as the Bible tells us. At the same time, God is Father; God is Son; God is Holy Spirit. To be Christian is to acknowledge everything that I have just said as true. It is

not self-contradictory, but true. For now, let us remain on the topic that God is love and that the reason this is so, is because God exists as a community of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” answered Esaiiah.

Koffi was not sure if he completely understood everything that Esaiiah was saying, but he understood enough. God is love because that is part of God’s character from all eternity. That much, he could accept and believe. The rest that his uncle Esaiiah had spoken, well, Koffi hoped that it might become clearer later on when Uncle Esaiiah explained the Trinity.

“And now, you say that we express love the way that God does?” Koffi asked.

“Yes,” said Esaiiah. “We as people, both Christian believers and non-Christian alike, manifest love that is similar to God’s love. For instance, consider Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:9-11, “Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” Esaiiah read from the Bible.

“And you believe that passage can apply to both believers and non-Christians alike?” asked Philippe.

“Yes, I believe it to be so. Consider those we know who follow our old traditions or even those who are Muslims. Does this passage not speak of them as well concerning the love that they show to their sons and daughters?” asked Esaiiah.

The group murmured their assent to Esaiiah’s words. What he was saying made sense to them.

Esaiiah continued, “But we can go further and talk about believers and what God wants us to be, which Romans 8:29 says is ‘to be conformed to the image of His Son,’ which we know is Jesus Christ. And since we believe, as Thomas confessed in the Gospel of John, that Jesus is ‘my Lord and my God,’ then to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, is to become more like God Himself in His character and nature,” Esaiiah explained.

Esaiiah continued, “In like manner, Jesus Christ expects his Church to act in love, like His love, to a greater degree than even non-believers. First, we are to love God by loving Him. Jesus says as much when he says, ‘If you love me, you will keep My commandments,’ in John 14:15.”

The group nodded. Everyone seemed to agree with what Esaiiah was saying.

Esaiiah continued teaching, saying, “And love should be a sign that Jesus has saved us and given us the Holy Spirit, which is why Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22-23, ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,’ and so on. But notice that love is the first fruit of the Spirit that Paul mentions.”

Koffi asked, “So then, is love the only way that we are like God morally?”

Esaiiah shook his head and grinned. “We have only gotten started, Koffi!”

Everyone laughed, and the atmosphere seemed to become more relaxed after so much dense discussion of biblical truth. Sometimes, everyone needed a break from so much content.

Esaiiah paused for a moment before continuing. After a brief pause, he then said, “Actually, Koffi, many of the other ways that we are like God morally stem from love or are actually expressions of that love. Take the goodness of God, for example. Everything that is good in this world, including us, is an expression of God’s own goodness. In Luke 18:19, as one instance, Jesus says, ‘No one is good but God alone,’ which proves that all goodness comes from God.”

Marie-Noëlle, flipping through her own Bible that she had brought outside from her room, stopped at a place, and read from Psalm 34:8, “Oh taste and see that the LORD is good!”

She continued, “And Psalm 106:1 says, ‘Praise the LORD! Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good,’ and Psalm 107:1 says, ‘Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His lovingkindness is everlasting.’”

Esaiiah nodded, “Well and good, Marie-Noëlle!”

Koffi then asked, “What are some other ways, morally, that we are like God?” he asked.

“Mercy is a quality that extends from both God’s love and his goodness, which is in His nature to demonstrate understanding and compassion towards us in our moments of weakness and hardship,” replied Esaiiah.

Esaiiah then said, “Exodus 34:6 mentions that as God passed by Moses, He proclaimed, ‘The LORD, The LORD, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth,’ which shows how mercy is part of God’s nature. Psalm 103:8 also reads, ‘The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.’”

Philippe then asked, “And God expects us to show mercy as well?”



To which Marie-Noëlle answered, “I would think so, since Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:7, ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.’”

Esaiah nodded and said, “All of you are learning among yourselves and I would almost think that you don’t need a teacher!”

But Koffi wanted to learn more. He wanted this evening to continue with his family and his uncle leading the discussion. He was learning so much that he did not want to do anything that would stop the moment.

“Please Uncle,” he said, “continue what you were saying. What are some other ways, morally speaking, that people are more like God?”

Esaiah quietly chuckled. “You don’t want this gathering to stop, do you, Koffi?”

“That or Koffi is putting off his assignment that is due tomorrow,” Philippe added.

Esaiah ignored the comment despite the giggling from some of the other family members. He answered, “Koffi, we haven’t even mentioned half of the moral qualities that we share with God. But I think that our sense of justice also comes from God and his nature as the Judge over all creation.”

Koffi, eager to learn more, asked, “So what qualities are those?”

“First, there is holiness, or that part of God that is completely removed from any sin or moral blemish,” answered Esaiah, before continuing, “Scripture refers to God’s holiness in Leviticus 19:2, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’ That shows how God wants us to be like He is.”

Esaiah then added, “Other passages include Psalm 78:41 and Psalm 89:18, that refer to God as the ‘Holy One of Israel.’

Koffi nodded. “Please go on, Uncle,” he urged

Esaiah went down the list, “Then from God’s holiness is his justice, which is the desire to respond to acts of wickedness that are contrary to God’s nature or character and inevitably lead to the suffering of others. God’s justice visits those who do not uphold His holiness. We see references to God’s justice in Deuteronomy 32:4 which says, ‘All His ways are just,’ and in Genesis 18:25 Moses asks God, ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly,’ suggesting that Moses indeed understood God to be this way.

Marie-Noëlle added, “And God would want us, as the Church, to be like Him in acting justly since Micah 6:8 reads, ‘He has told you, oh man, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.’”

Esaiah went on, “And we also would be missing something if we did not mention that along with God’s holiness and justice is God’s wrath.”

The group suddenly became quiet. God’s wrath was not a quality they had considered after discussing love, goodness, and mercy. Could Esaiah be mistaken here?

“Uncle, why would we include the wrath of God?” asked Koffi.

“Because, Koffi, in the midst of evil, mere smiling benevolence becomes weak, impotent sentimentality if it does nothing in response,” replied Esaiah.

“I suppose that if God is God, He must uphold his justice as well as extend mercy,” Marie-Noëlle said thoughtfully.

“Exactly right, Marie-Noëlle,” said Esaiah, “Look at Deuteronomy 9:7-8, where it says that the people of Israel had ‘provoked the LORD their God to wrath,’ or in Romans 1:18 where Paul says, ‘For the wrath of God is revealed in heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness in men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,’” said Esaiah.

“But are you saying that the wrath of people is like God’s wrath,” asked Philippe. “Look at the tribal warfare that goes on in our continent. Look at the riots that break out and destroy cars and store fronts. Is that what you are saying when you tell us that people are like God in His wrath?”

“You make a good point,” Esaiah answered, “that many, if not most, examples of wrath among people are not like the character of God. The Bible agrees with you when it says, ‘the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God,’ in James 1:20.”

Esaiah continued, “But consider Ephesians 4:26 that says, ‘be angry and do not sin.’ Notice that the Apostle Paul did not say, ‘never get angry.’ Rather, he tells us ‘do not sin’ whenever we do become angry. There is a right time and a right way to show our anger.”

“What could those times possibly be?” asked Philippe.

“What about anger at the injustice of corruption?” said Marie-Noëlle.

“Yeah, or anger at the harm caused to innocent people such as during civil war, terrorist attacks, or by thieves?” said Koffi.

“Are there other ways that people are like God morally?” asked Philippe.

Esaiah grinned. “I think that we discussed enough to keep us busy for a while,” he said. “The important thing now is to recognize the importance that people share some of God’s moral qualities,” he said.

“And that just because people may share in these same moral qualities with God does not mean that all expressions of them are valid,” added Marie-Noëlle.

“Absolutely right,” said Esaiah.

“But it is the fact that God created humanity to share certain qualities with Him, among them the moral qualities that we have discussed, that enables us to understand God better than we could otherwise,” Esaiah concluded.

Koffi was glad for this discussion. However, he knew that there were other ways that human beings were like God and he wanted his uncle Esaiah to continue this discussion.

## Chapter Six Questions

1. What does it mean to be like God morally? How do you explain the set of morals that people have innately?

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2. What are the two ideas Esaias mentions from an Africa traditional region's understanding of the nature of God that are contrary to the nature of the Christian God?

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3. How does the Trinity explain how God can be love for all eternity ?

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4. Why would you say that there must be at least some similarity between God and certain parts of His creation?

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## CHAPTER 7

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### HOW IS GOD LIKE US IN THE WAY WE THINK AND WILL?

“So then, Uncle, how are we like God in other ways besides moral qualities?” asked Koffi, secretly hoping that the dialogue would continue.

Some of the aunts and uncles rose from their seats, begging to be excused as they performed other tasks in the evening. But many, particularly the younger family, remained seated, their eyes fixed on Esaiiah, wondering what he was going to say. Like Koffi, they seemed to be hoping that Esaiiah was willing to continue what had become an engaging discussion.

“That’s actually much easier to talk about than the moral qualities that we share with God, Koffi,” his uncle replied.

*“Finally, a chance to catch our breath after some of the last few discussions,”* Koffi thought. As much as he found his uncle to be wise and discerning, Koffi did not want the discussion to become so dense that the rest of the family lost interest or decided that they had heard enough. Even though they had lost some of the participants, the majority still remained to listen.

“First, let’s start with the way that we think like God,” his uncle said.

“But I would imagine that God’s intellect is much greater than ours. He obviously knows a lot more things than we do, and perhaps ever shall,” said Philippe.

“Of course, Philippe, you are right. That is not to say, however, that the way that we think at least mirrors the way that God thinks. In fact, we could not even have this discussion if it were not so,” Esaiiah responded.

Koffi nodded to himself. Of course, everything about human beings seemed to be tied or connected somehow with who God is. And then, to know some things about God seemed to teach Koffi many things about people. The

two realities seemed to be related to one another. Thinking like this made Koffi's head spin.

"Well, to begin, there is the fact that God knows everything," began Esaiiah.

"That is not hard to imagine since He is God," remarked Philippe.

"Yes, Scripture is clear about God knowing everything even if it does not say so explicitly," remarked Esaiiah.

"I suppose we could consider Psalm 139 as a starting point for supporting Biblical passages?" asked Marie-Noëlle.

Flipping through his Bible, Esaiiah stopped almost half-way through, looked at a passage for a moment before he began to read:

O LORD, You have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
You scrutinize my path and my lying down,  
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before there is a word on my tongue,  
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.  
You have enclosed me behind and before,  
And laid Your hand on me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.  
It is too high, I cannot attain to it.

"Yes, Marie-Noëlle, that passage describes God being all-knowing very well!" Esaiiah replied. "Also consider I John 3:20, which says that 'God is greater than our heart and *knows all things*.'"

"What is another way that we think like God?" asked Koffi.

Esaiiah responded, "Not just in knowledge but also in wisdom!"

Koffi scratched his head. "What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?" he asked.

Esaiiah smiled. He waited for a moment to see if anyone would reply to Koffi's question. Finally, he asked everyone, "Does anybody have an answer for Koffi? What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?" he asked.

The entire circle was quiet. Philippe added quietly, "Isn't wisdom just a high level of intelligence?"

Marie-Noëlle shook her head. “I don’t think that wisdom is mere brain-power,” she said at last. “But I am not certain what the difference is between knowledge and wisdom.”

At last, Esaiiah spoke, “Knowledge and wisdom are related to one another. But knowledge is merely the accumulation of facts and information. A person can know a great many things and yet still be very unwise.”

“So then, what is wisdom? And is it better to gain wisdom rather than knowledge?” asked Philippe.

Esaiiah shook his head. “A wise person should never place knowledge and wisdom against each other. The two are distinct and yet related to each other. Wisdom is the application of knowledge. It is one thing to know a great many things that seem to be unrelated to one another.”

Koffi shook his head. “Uncle, I am afraid that I do not understand what you mean when you say that wisdom is the application of knowledge. What are you saying, exactly?”

Esaiiah paused before speaking, then drew a deep breath. “Koffi, it is one thing to know that eating too much sugar from raw sugar cane is bad for your teeth. Correct?”

Koffi nodded.

Esaiiah continued to make his point, “You may know that eating too much sugar is bad for your health; you may even be able to explain why too much sugar is so bad for your health. But do you have the wisdom to *act* upon what you know? The manner in which you act upon the knowledge that you possess is the measure of your wisdom.”

“So then, wisdom really is the *application* of our knowledge,” Koffi concluded.

“Exactly, and as Uncle Esaiiah mentioned earlier, we must understand that knowledge and wisdom are dependent upon each other. Our knowledge requires wisdom in order to act rightly upon that which we have learned. Similarly, the greater the knowledge that we possess, the greater the potential for our wisdom. Knowledge is the raw material that wisdom needs in order to act accordingly,” added Philippe.

“So then, what does all of this discussion about wisdom have to do with God?” asked Koffi. Admittedly, he was enjoying this discussion and learning the

difference between knowledge and wisdom. However, Koffi was eager to return to the subject of God and His nature.

“Koffi, sometimes we have to know precisely what it is that we are discussing. Since the topic of knowledge and wisdom applies both to God and ourselves, knowing about both better than what we do tells us facts about not only God, but also ourselves,” Esaiiah explained.

Koffi nodded, graciously receiving his uncle’s gentle admonition. What his uncle said was true. Koffi found to his surprise how he was not only learning about God but, interestingly enough, he was learning more about who he was at the same time. What he learned reminded him that God was much bigger than he was, and that he needed to be more like God’s nature and character than what he had been.

Esaiiah continued: “Since we have already concluded, based on what the Bible says, that God’s knowledge is infinite, we should also acknowledge that God’s wisdom is also infinite in everything that God says and does.”

Philippe’s mouth gaped open. “So then, are you saying that God’s actions in our world, in the midst of wars, famine, disease, and poverty are the best possible actions? How can you say that?”

Esaiiah nodded his head. “Philippe, I say that God is infinitely wise and, believe me, I am not at all ignorant of all the problems in the world that you have mentioned. It is a puzzle that I do not wish to say that I have all the answers.”

Esaiiah continued, “The issues are that we believe that the God of the Bible is all-Powerful. We also acknowledge that God is infinitely good. And yet, evil exists. It is hard to reconcile all three together. It only becomes more difficult when we acknowledge that part of what makes up God’s infinite power is the fact that God knows all things and has all wisdom.”

Koffi asked, clearly disturbed by all that Esaiiah had mentioned, “So then, how do we respond to this?”

Esaiiah smiled before saying, “Sometimes, Koffi, there are matters that we have to accept on faith. We also have to realize that there are matters that surpass our capacity to understand everything involved. I believe, on faith, what the Bible says about God: that He is all-powerful and that God is good. Despite all the evil that I see all around me, I still believe what the Bible says about God. It also means that I believe that God controls the future, in His power and wisdom, even when events all around me may make it seem like otherwise.”



Koffi nodded. He felt like the discussion was turning back around to topics that they had discussed earlier in the afternoon. He remembered how he and his uncle had discussed why Christians could have confidence in both God and the Bible. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, testified by five hundred witnesses, affirmed that God had revealed Himself in Scripture. Jesus had testified to the authority of the Bible and its truth. The truthfulness of His own testimony became clear by His death, burial, and resurrection. And in believing in the Bible, that meant that Koffi had to accept, by faith, what it said about God's goodness, His power, and His wisdom in dealing with evil. It was starting to make sense.

“So, when we say that God is all-wise, we have to accept it on faith because the Bible says so,” Koffi concluded at last.

Esaiah nodded. “Yes, the Bible says in Romans 16:27, ‘To the only wise God,’ and I Corinthians 1:25 says that ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.’ Verse thirty then says, ‘By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God.’ And James 1:5 tells us, ‘If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.’

Marie-Noëlle added, “I consider Romans 11:33, ‘Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!’”

It seemed like the group had acknowledged God's infinite wisdom and how people are like God in demonstrating some measure of wisdom themselves. But Koffi realized that there had to be more ways that people were like God than just knowledge and wisdom. He had to ask his uncle.

“So, tell us, Uncle,” he began, “how else are we like God in the way that we think?”

Esaiah replied, “We are also similar to God in the way that He thinks in our truthfulness.”

Koffi again scratched his head as he had so many times before. “I am not certain what you mean by saying that,” he admitted. So much, it seemed, he did not even begin to understand what his uncle's reply really meant. He understood that his uncle Esaiah was patient enough to explain to him what exactly he was trying to say.

Esaiah explained, “Truthfulness means faithfulness to what you say you are and do. God says that He is faithful and true. Truthfulness also means that something is factually correct.”

Marie-Noëlle asked, “And people are like God in that they have the capacity to be faithful and to speak what is factually correct?”

Esaiah answered, “Yes, that is what I am saying. Only we are not truthful in the same way that God is. Jesus, for example, describes Himself as ‘the way, the Truth, and the life,’ in John 14:6 and He is also described as ‘Faithful and True’ in Revelation 19:11.”

“What do other passages say about God’s truthfulness?” asked Philippe.

“Well, there is I John 5:20, which says, ‘And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life,’” Esaiah responded.

“And how does this matter to us, exactly?” asked Philippe.

Esaiah replied immediately, “It means everything if we are to serve God and we are to be like him at least in some ways, Philippe.”

“How, Uncle?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“First of all, let’s discuss creation in general as it applies to all people at all times. The fact that God is all-knowing, all-wise, and truthful is revealed in His creation. We look at the world. We are able to understand what is actually around us, meaning that the creation is knowable, comprehensible, and rational. If God were not all-knowing, we would have no guarantee of creation being rational or even having the ability to have this kind of reasonable discussion in the first place.”

“Wow, I hadn’t thought of it like that, Uncle Esaiah!” exclaimed Koffi.

“We’re only getting started! The fact that God is wise means that there is a right path to follow in life and that other paths are folly and lead only to destruction, even if they might seem to be the right path to some people or to be the best option at the time,” Esaiah continued.

“‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end, it leads to death,’” responded Marie-Noëlle.

“Proverbs 14:12. Very good!” Esaiah beamed.

“Creation reflects and manifests the wisdom of God, and God’s wisdom is the way of life in this world that reflects His nature and character. If we as people everywhere did not manifest God’s wisdom in at least some degree, that would mean that murder might be wrong among some people, but entirely valid and justified in other places. That would only lead to chaos,” Isaiah continued.

“What about truthfulness?” asked Koffi.

“Very simple. If creation did not correspond in general to our senses, could we really trust that God Himself is true? Could we ever really believe that we can trust Him to be faithful in what He promises?” Isaiah answered.

Koffi nodded. What his uncle was saying sounded very deep and profound. Truly, this evening was going to be one in which Koffi grew as a person and as a believer in God through Jesus Christ.

“And then, we could never really trust one another either,” responded Philippe. “I mean, how could we have any basis to say that what someone else was saying to us really meant what we thought that person was saying? People would be talking past each other and nobody would be certain of what the other person was saying!”

“Not just in the content but also with their intentions,” Isaiah agreed.

“Civilization would be impossible because there would be no agreed upon standards nor basis for trust among the citizens,” said Marie-Noëlle.

“Agreed. And living together communally is part of what it means to reflect the image of God in human beings since God is, by His nature, a communal being, existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

“That part about God still confuses me,” said Philippe.

“Nobody really understands it in its entirety,” replied Isaiah. “What is important is that we see how God’s nature as being all-knowing, all-wise, and truthful impacts not only the creation in general, but also God’s people, the Church.”

“What do you mean, Uncle?” asked Koffi. Once again, just as Koffi thought that he was beginning to understand something, his uncle introduced a new thought that surpassed Koffi’s understanding. Koffi felt as if he could never reach his uncle’s wisdom.

“God’s people are the Church of Jesus Christ. Not just one particular church or denomination, like the Baptists, the Presbyterians, or the Assemblies of God. I

am talking about the universal Church, composed of believers from various denominational backgrounds. We are the people of God or a people unto His possession, as Judges 20:2, 2 Samuel 14:3, and I Peter 2:9 describe us,” explained Esaiiah.

“Please, Uncle, go on,” urged Koffi.

“Another term that the Bible gives to the community of believers is that of the “Temple,” or that place in which God resides,” continued Esaiiah.

“I don’t understand,” Philippe blurted, “I mean, where are you going with all of this and how does it relate to God’s knowledge, wisdom, and truthfulness?”

Koffi did not agree with Philippe’s abruptness. But, like Philippe, he wondered where Esaiiah was taking the discussion. What was he trying to convey?

“Only that in this world, Philippe, we have a responsibility as the Temple of God to proclaim a *knowledge* of the *truth* that God has given us in His Word concerning His Son Jesus Christ that leads to *wisdom* in living,” Esaiiah answered.

“So then, believers should have a greater concern for reflecting God’s knowledge, his wisdom, and His truthfulness than the general population that does not confess Jesus Christ,” said Koffi. At last, Koffi understood where his uncle was taking the discussion. What had seemed to be so vague and unclear was now much more understandable. Koffi realized, however, that he only understood perhaps a fraction of what his uncle was talking about. Something told Koffi that the full implications of what his uncle had been discussing with them went further and deeper than they were yet ready to comprehend.

“Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God,” Koffi murmured, quoting from Romans 11:33.

Esaiiah smiled upon hearing someone refer to that passage for the second time during their discussion about the knowledge, wisdom, and truthfulness of God.

“You are growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” he said, looking at Koffi.

Koffi shrugged, quoting I Corinthians 13:12, “I know in part, and I see in part. But later I shall know even as I myself am known. For now, we see as through a glass but darkly, but later face to face.” Koffi felt that he had grown so much today, yet still had so much more to learn.

## Chapter Seven Questions

1. What does the fact that God is true mean for us and our relationship with Him? What does it mean about how we act in this world? What would be the implications if God was *not* true, both in our relationship to Him and to the world around us?

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2. How would you explain the difference between knowledge and wisdom? How are they distinct yet related to one another and never against each another?

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3. In what ways does God's nature as being all-knowing, all-wise, and truthful impact not only the creation in general, but also God's people, the Church?

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4. Explain in your own words the importance of God sharing the way that He thinks and wills with human beings? What would the world be like if it were not so?

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## CHAPTER 8

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### WHY JESUS IS MORE THAN A PROPHET/THE TRINITY

In all of this discussion, Koffi thought, one topic continued to surface. However, it had been a distraction during the discussion at hand. Perhaps, Koffi had thought, now was the time to discuss this difficult subject before the evening got too late. But he wondered if the rest of the family sitting in a circle around him and his uncle Esaiiah would be willing to tackle such a weighty subject.

“Uncle,” Koffi began. “What exactly is the Trinity and why do Christians make such a big deal about it?” he asked.

A torrent of groans and sarcastic laughter erupted from all around the circle as most of the adults rose from their seats and bid everyone a good night. Apparently, most of the family were not ready for this type of a discussion. Koffi looked around him. All that remained besides himself and Esaiiah were Marie-Noëlle and Philippe. Apparently, they were interested in hearing how Esaiiah was going to respond to Koffi’s question.

“Isn’t the Trinity something that most Christians have no need to bother with?” asked Philippe. “It seems like a subject for some theology professors to discuss, not so much for pastors and even less for church members!”

“I’m not so sure,” said Marie-Noëlle. “It seems to me that the Trinity is one of the essentials of Christian belief. Only, I don’t think that I could really explain why.”

Esaiiah listened to the three youths talking among themselves. He seemed to be eager to hear what they thought before he ventured to say anything. Koffi privately wondered why his uncle Esaiiah waited. Was he hoping to hear something from one of them? Perhaps he wanted to determine if they were ready for an explanation of such a deep doctrine. Koffi hoped that Esaiiah would not delay the discussion until a later time or ignore the subject altogether.

Finally, Esaiiah spoke. “The Trinity is one of the essentials of the faith. It is not some meaningless discussion for academics in universities and seminaries to debate. Even average church goers like ourselves should have a general understanding of the subject if we are going to grow in our faith. It is sad, really, that pastors do not teach their congregations about this subject more than what they do.”

“But what makes it so important?” asked Philippe. Although he had not left like the others, he did seem to be nearing the end of his patience. This last question seemed to be his last effort to find out something before Philippe quit and left for bed.

“First, let’s discuss what we mean when we say, ‘Trinity,’ Philippe,” responded Esaiiah.

Philippe nodded. “Okay,” he said.

“We should be honest and forthright by acknowledging that the word, ‘Trinity,’ is not found anywhere in the Bible,” Esaiiah began.

“Is that a problem?” asked Marie-Noëlle, who seemed to be disturbed by Esaiiah’s stunning admission.

“It would be if the Bible said nothing at all about the Trinity even if it doesn’t use that specific word,” Esaiiah responded. “As it is, we find that the *idea* of the Trinity is throughout the Bible even if that word is never used. I, for one, am not ashamed to say that I believe in the Trinity,” Esaiiah answered.

“So, is that why the Trinity is important, just because it’s in the Bible?” Philippe asked. He did not seem to be impressed with this answer.

Esaiiah shook his head. “While that would be reason enough, Philippe, no, that is not the only reason why the Trinity is important. Another reason is that, without the Trinity, Christians would not have any reasonable basis by which they could consider Jesus to be God incarnate and at the same time claim to be monotheists, or people who believe that there is only one God,” answered Esaiiah.

“So then, without the doctrine of the Trinity, Judaism and Islam would be correct in saying that Christians worship more than one god,” said Philippe thoughtfully.

“That is exactly right, Philippe. Christians must defend the Trinity,” Esaiiah answered.



“But can you explain to us exactly what the Trinity means?” asked Koffi. He admitted to himself that he seemed to have a very poor understanding of the doctrine and probably could not explain it to somebody else if he tried.

Esaiah took a deep breath before he began. Then he said, “The first thing that we must acknowledge is that there is only one God,” he began.

Koffi, Marie-Noëlle, and Philippe nodded their heads. That was something that they all knew and understood.

Esaiah continued, “We should show where the Bible makes this point clearly so that there is no room for doubt or misunderstanding. First, the Bible says in Exodus 20:3, ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’”

“But that could mean that while there are other gods, God wanted the people of Israel to follow Him and Him alone,” Philippe objected.

Esaiah nodded, “Yes, that is correct. We have to see what the Bible says in other places. Let’s turn now to Isaiah 45:5-6, ‘I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.’

Koffi nodded his head as he heard Esaiah read the passage. “That seems to be pretty straightforward,” he said.

Esaiah smiled before saying, “Even more so when you consider Isaiah 43:11, ‘I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no savior besides Me,’ or again in Isaiah 44:6, ‘Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.’”

Koffi concluded, “I think, then, that we are all agreed: the Bible clearly says that there is only one God!” That comment led to nods and words of affirmation from both Marie-Noëlle and Philippe.

“But now comes the difficult part!” began Esaiah. “At the same time that we say that God is one and that there is only one God, we must also say that God eternally exists as three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And each Person, while distinct from the other two Persons, at the same time shares the fullness of divinity.”

Koffi scratched his head perhaps harder than he had all day. “Uncle, I believe that what you have just said is the hardest, most difficult thing to understand of all the things I have heard you say tonight!”

After a moment of wild laughter from everyone assembled, Esaiiah began to explain what he had meant.

“Let’s begin by first showing that the Bible considers each Person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as divine. Bear in mind that we have already established that the Bible clearly teaches that there is one God!” Esaiiah explained.

Koffi, Marie-Noëlle, and Philippe nodded, drinking in as much as they could from every word that Esaiiah was saying. “*This is going to be good,*” thought Koffi.

“Showing that the Bible considers the Father to be God is easy,” said Esaiiah while flipping through the pages of his Bible. “Look at the New Testament. In every letter written by Paul, he gives his greeting to the churches by referring to ‘God the Father.’ He does this in Romans 1:7, in I Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:1, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:3...”

“I think we get it, Uncle,” Philippe said. It was obvious that Paul referred to God the Father in his greetings in all of his letters in the New Testament.

Esaiiah continued, “Very well then. Let’s turn next to God the Son, Jesus Christ. John 1:1 is very clear about that subject. It reads, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ It should be very clear that John is referring to Jesus Christ as the Word since he says later in this chapter, ‘And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ That can only be describing Jesus’ incarnation and birth,” explained Esaiiah.

Philippe asked curiously, “But Uncle, we have had Jehovah’s Witnesses visit this place. In their Bibles, they read John 1:1 and it says, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.’ So, which one is correct?”

Koffi leaned in to hear Esaiiah better. He remembered that his teacher, M. Amekudzie had referred to the bible of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and had implied that there were differences between it and the Protestant Bible. So this, perhaps among other passages, was what M. Amekudzie was talking about.

Philippe always asked such hard questions! Koffi wondered how Esaiah was going to explain this problem.

Esaiah explained, “First of all, Philippe, the Jehovah’s Witnesses stand alone with their bible and that particular interpretation. No other Bible translation in French, in English, or in other languages read the passage the same way that the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ bible does. Not even the Catholic Bible.”

“Is that all?” Philippe asked.

“Actually, no it isn’t,” Esaiah responded. “Look at John 20:28. Once Thomas, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, sees Jesus risen from the dead, places his fingers in the nail holes in Jesus’ hands, and touches Jesus’ side where the spear had pierced Him, he falls at Jesus’ feet and says, ‘My Lord and my God!’”

“It doesn’t get any clearer than that!” said Koffi.

“So then, we can see clearly that Jesus is also God according to the Bible,” Philippe concluded.

Esaiah continued, “But we also have to consider the Holy Spirit. First, the Holy Spirit is included with God the Father and the Son in matters like the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 when Jesus says, ‘Go, therefore, make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’ Also, Paul includes all three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in different parts of his letters describing the work of God in believers.”

“What are some examples?” asked Koffi.

“First, consider Ephesians 1:3-14 when Paul describes everything that God does to bless us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. First, the Father chose us and predestined us in verses four and five. Then, in verses six through twelve, Paul describes the work of the Son, including purchased us with His blood, granted us forgiveness of sins, made known to us His will, and gave us an inheritance. Then, he mentions the benefits that we have through the Holy Spirit in verses thirteen and fourteen: sealed by the Spirit of promise and that the Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance. Throughout all of these blessings, the contributions of each member of the Trinity is described. The Holy Spirit is part of all of it,” Esaiah explained.

“Is there another example like that one?” Marie-Noëlle asked.

“There is also I Corinthians 12:4-6, describing how God distributes spiritual gifts to believers in Jesus Christ. Paul writes that each member of the Trinity

is involved in the bestowal of spiritual gifts when he writes, ‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same *Spirit*. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same *Lord*. There are varieties of effects, but the same *God* who works all things in all persons.’”

“So then, you are saying that Paul is referencing each member of the Trinity in this passage when he distinguishes between the Spirit, Lord, and God in this passage?” asked Philippe.

Esaiah nodded. “I think that is what Paul is doing. Yes, Philippe, that is what I am saying.”

“Uncle, you’ve already convinced me, but is there a Scripture passage that says something more directly about the Holy Spirit as God?” asked Koffi.

“Actually, yes there is, Koffi,” began Esaiah. “We see one such example in Acts 5:1-4. Reading this story, it talks about how Ananias and Saphira had lied to Peter and the Apostles when they gave money to the church. They said that they had given the full price of the sale of their property. In reality, they had held back some of the money from the sale for themselves and gave only a portion of the amount to the Church.”

“So, they were punished for not giving the full amount to the Apostles?” asked Philippe.

“No, Philippe, nobody commanded them to sell their property in the first place. Rather, their sin was not necessarily in holding back some of the money for themselves, but in giving funds to the Apostles and lying that it was the full value of the property,” answered Esaiah.

“So how does this passage teach us about the divinity of the Holy Spirit?” asked Koffi.

“Look at verses three and four,” replied Esaiah. “First, Peter asks Ananias why he had lied to the Holy Spirit. Then, later in verse four, Peter says, ‘You have not lied to men but to God.’”

“So then, it would appear that Peter equated lying to the Holy Spirit as lying to God,” said Koffi.

“Yes, indeed,” answered Esaiah.

“So that passage and all the others mentioned indicate that God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” said Marie-Noëlle.

“Yes, all three Persons represent the Trinity and are therefore, divine. They are one God,” explained Esaiiah.

“I still don’t understand!” exclaimed Philippe.

“Could we say that God appeared as the Father in the Old Testament, as Jesus in the Gospels, and as the Holy Spirit in Acts?” asked Koffi.

Esaiiah smiled before speaking, “Koffi, it would be very tempting to say that is true were it not that the Bible speaks so clearly against that idea.”

“But where *does* the Bible speak against that idea? That seems like the only way to understand the Trinity and believe in one God,” replied Philippe.

“Look at the baptism of Jesus,” replied Esaiiah as he flipped through the pages of his Bible. “We read about it in Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and in Luke 3:21-22. I’ll read from Mark since the other Gospels are almost identical to what it says. Mark reads, ‘In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: ‘You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.’”

“I don’t get it,” said Philippe. “How does this speak against the idea that Koffi suggested that we find God the Father in the Old Testament, Jesus in the Gospels, and the Holy Spirit in Acts?”

Koffi suddenly had an insight. “Look!” he said. “At his baptism, Jesus is coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit is descending upon Him as a dove, and a voice from heaven calls Jesus, ‘My beloved Son.’ That voice must be that of the Father, since He called Jesus His Son.”

“Well done!” said Esaiiah.

“So then, we cannot say that the Trinity is merely God appearing as different Persons at different moments in biblical history,” said Marie-Noëlle. “Because here it is clear that Jesus is distinct from the Holy Spirit and from the Father.”

“And yet we as Christians claim that we worship one God; yet here we say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are both simultaneously divine and distinct from one another even as we say that there is only one God,” said Philippe.

“It certainly is a mystery, isn’t it, Philippe?” said Esaiiah, chuckling at Philippe’s profound perplexity. “Every Christian who has discussed the doctrine of the Trinity has encountered the same struggle, the exact same tensions that you have just mentioned. Truthfully, we finite creatures cannot fully understand our Creator who is infinitely above us!”

“But is there some way that we can offer some sort of explanation to those who are skeptical of our beliefs, even if that explanation at some level fails to do justice to what we clearly cannot understand in its entirety?” asked Koffi. He was thinking of what M. Amekudzie would say right now if he were present and participating in this discussion. Seeing contradictions in Christian doctrine like the Trinity appeared to be what M. Amekudzie reveled in exposing and ridiculing. Koffi knew that he would have to have a good explanation for the likes of his public-school teacher.

“Let’s start with some popular analogies that people have given over the years. They may sound good, but they ultimately fail to explain the Trinity as well as they claim,” said Esaiiah.

“First, some people compare the Trinity to an egg. An egg has three parts: the shell, the egg white, and the yolk. That example does not work because the shell is not simultaneously the egg white and the yolk. A similar example is that of an apple. An apple has a skin, the fruit, and the core. The apple illustration fails for the same reason as the egg illustration does,” Esaiiah explained.

Koffi scratched his head, yet again. He had actually considered the apple and the egg illustrations as good ways by which to make the complex more understandable for people. Now, however, he felt like he was even more confused than before.

“So then, what illustration would you use to explain the Trinity to someone,” Koffi asked. He wondered what Esaiiah was going to give as an answer.

Esaiiah smiled as he spoke, “None, Koffi. I would not use anything in creation to use as an illustration for the Trinity. Because everything will fall short and do injustice to the majesty and glory of God.”

“Why do you say that?” challenged Philippe.

“The Second Commandment: You shall not make for yourself any graven images,” replied Esaiiah calmly.

“Isn’t that commandment just against making idols?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“It definitely applies to idols, Marie,” Esaiiah explained. “But that is not all that that commandment is prohibiting. God is so great, we do Him dishonor if we try to represent Him with any kind of symbol, image, or representation.”

“Is that why most Protestant churches do not have statues of Jesus or other images in their places of worship?” asked Philippe.

“Yes, indeed. It is also why we cannot use anything in creation to try to explain the Trinity,” Esaiiah said.

“So then, what do we do if we try to explain what we believe about the Trinity to someone who asks us?” said Marie-Noëlle.

“I would simply use my Bible and explain the Trinity to them step-by-step as I have done with you,” replied Esaiiah. “Sometimes, there is no shortcut or easy way around a difficult matter. The best that we can do is to take people through the same process that we followed to understand the same thing. It takes time but it is the wise approach, I believe.”

“This topic seems so abstract and impractical to me,” said Philippe. “What benefit is there to understanding the Trinity other than showing other people how smart we Christians think we are?”

Esaiiah grinned. “It’s not the subject itself, it’s how we go about explaining it that shows our pride, Philippe,” he said. “I would not discuss this doctrine until after somebody has learned the essentials of the faith, such as salvation by faith, who Jesus is, and membership in a local church.”

Koffi considered, “Maybe, though, even a new believer, say a former Muslim, would benefit from understanding this doctrine. The imams teach that Jesus was a prophet and nothing more. In fact, Mohammed is supposed to be a prophet of greater stature than Jesus. But the Trinity helps us to explain why we can boldly proclaim that Jesus is God the Son and still say that we believe in one God only.”

“And many people only hear messages about prosperity or miracles and healing rather than solid, Christian teaching. So that means that believers must have this kind of teaching, for nothing else than to give them a more solid foundation against the Prosperity Gospel preachers and Neo-Pentecostalists,” said Marie-Noëlle.

Esaiiah smiled. “Yes,” he said, “the Trinity is an essential doctrine in the Christian faith. It is not some mere intellectual curiosity. Teaching it is important even to the average person sitting in the worship service.”

## Chapter Eight Questions

1. Why is the Trinity important for Christian belief? What is the implication of Jesus as God incarnate?

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2. Why do Muslims reject the Trinity? Who is Jesus according to Muslims? Is the Islamic rejection of Jesus as God incarnate important for belief in God?

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3. How would you respond to someone who says that Christians worship three gods?

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4. How does the baptism of Jesus help us understand and explain the Trinity?

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## CHAPTER 9

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### WHY WE PRAY THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

“Uncle, I’m confused about something,” said Koffi. He had wanted to ask his question earlier during a previous discussion. However, he did not want to distract from the topic and so had resisted the temptation to say anything. Now, however, after there had been a pause of some minutes after their discussion about the Trinity, Koffi believed that he could ask Uncle Esaiiah what he had been wondering about all along.

“What is it?” asked Esaiiah.

“When you mentioned that God is all-wise and works things out according to His perfect plan, I wondered why we should pray at all if God already has everything worked out before we have even thought to ask about it,” Koffi said.

“So, if I understand your meaning,” began Esaiiah, “If God is all-wise and all-powerful, then He is already working in the world according to His plan which is perfect. Therefore, how can my prayers even matter if God already has everything figured out?” asked Esaiiah.

“It’s worse than that,” said Philippe. “Why act or do anything at all if God has already determined what He is going to do? It makes me feel like a robot or something. My decisions in day-to-day life don’t mean anything!”

Esaiiah smiled before speaking, “It does seem like what we say or do is rather insignificant, doesn’t it? But what if I tell you that it gets even more perplexing. What if I told you that God has not only *foreseen* what will happen but has also *predetermined in advance* what will take place?”

“That is very unnerving!” said Marie-Noëlle.

“But wait, it gets even better!” continued Esaiiah. “Not only has God predetermined in advance what will take place for all of history, God will also judge us and hold us accountable for our actions in this life!”

That last remark from his uncle was more than Koffi could stand.

“That would make God into a monster!” Philippe protested. “What you are saying cannot possibly be true!”

“How can you possibly explain all of this and not contradict yourself?” asked Marie-Noëlle. Koffi agreed with her. For once, he was beginning to doubt his uncle in what he was teaching him.

“Before I explain everything with Scripture, I will begin with a traditional riddle: on one stone it will fall over, on two stones it cannot stand, but with three stones it will stay still!”

Koffi scratched his head. “Huh?” he asked. He thought that maybe it was getting late and that Uncle Esaiiah needed to go to bed.

Esaiiah merely laughed. “What I am saying is that in order to understand the riddle of prayer, God’s infinite wisdom, and God’s infinite power, we have to consider the riddle of the three stones,” he said.

“I know the answer to the riddle!” Marie-Noëlle grinned with enthusiasm. “The answer is a pot of boiling water! It takes three stones to keep the pot steady over the fire.” Marie-Noëlle’s grin turned into a look of confusion. “But I don’t see what that has to do with prayer.”

Everyone seemed to share Marie-Noëlle’s confusion until Philippe gasped as if he’d just seen something for the first time.

“Are you suggesting that we have to hold three different truths in tension and that if we don’t keep them all together, then what we know about God on this subject will fall apart?” asked Philippe.

“Exactly right, Philippe!” cried Esaiiah.

Koffi was glad that Philippe had understood where their uncle Esaiiah was going with this discussion. He had begun to wonder if perhaps they had taken this discussion too far. It was reassuring to hear that they were still going in the right direction. Still, he wondered how his uncle was going to explain such a difficult teaching.

“Let’s start with the first stone,” said Esaiiah. “That is the truth that God sustains everything that exists, and that nothing exists apart from His will.”

“I think that everybody here agrees with that statement since we believe that God created everything there is,” said Koffi. Marie-Noëlle and Philippe nodded.

“Good. But let’s go ahead and see what the Bible says about it before we rush forward, shall we?” Esaiiah cautioned while flipping through the pages of his Bible. “First, read Hebrews 1:3, which says, ‘And He [that is referring to Jesus Christ] is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.’”

“So then, what this passage is saying is that all things continue to exist because Jesus upholds them by His word?” asked Koffi.

“Yes, that is exactly what it is saying,” answered Esaiiah. Turning again through his Bible, he continued, “Look also at Colossians 1:17, which says, ‘And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.’”

“It doesn’t get any clearer than that!” said Philippe.

Esaiiah resumed flipping through his Bible again, “But since what we are talking about seems to be so controversial, let’s be thorough and see what else the Bible says. Look with me at Acts 17:28, where Paul says, ‘For in Him we live, and move, and exist, as some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ And again, in Nehemiah 9:6, which says, ‘You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You.’”

“I think that you have made your point. Nothing can continue to exist unless God continually sustains it,” said Marie-Noëlle.

“And we are all agreed that it is so?” asked Esaiiah. As he watched Koffi, Marie-Noëlle, and Philippe nod their heads, he then surmised, “Then we can say that the first stone is firmly established.”

“So then, what is the second stone?” asked Koffi.

“The second stone is God’s permission, meaning that He allows His creatures, at some level, to act according to their own natures and wills, but still acting by God’s permission,” said Esaiiah.

“You mean, like, free will?” asked Philippe.

“Exactly right,” replied Esaiiah.

“So, what does the Bible tell us about God’s permission?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

Flipping through his Bible, Isaiah replied, “First, let’s look at everything in creation according to certain categories. We can start with things in general that have no will of their own, since that is the easiest. Psalm 148:8 says, “Fire and hail, storm and clouds, stormy wind fulfilling His word.”

“I guess that this passage means that the weather does what it does while still obeying God, including lightning and hail, storms and cloudy weather, and all the rest,” Koffi concluded.

Isaiah continued, “Job 37:6-13 says, ‘For to snow He says, ‘Fall on the earth,’ and to the downpour and the rain, ‘Be strong.’ He seals the hand of every man, that all men may know His work. Then the beast goes into its lair and remains in its den. Out of the south comes the storm, and out of the north the cold. From the breath of God ice is made, and the expanse of the waters is frozen. Also, with moisture He loads the thick cloud; He disperses the cloud of His lightning. It changes direction, turning around by His guidance, that it may do whatever He commands it on the face of the inhabited earth. Whether for correction, or for His world, or for loving kindness, He causes it to happen.”

“I think that the Bible is pretty apparent that all weather phenomena take place according to God’s purpose and plan,” said Philippe.

“But we haven’t discussed the animals,” said Isaiah as he continued flipping through his Bible. “For instance, look at Psalm 104:27-29, which says, ‘They [the animals] wait for You to give them their food in due season. You give to them, they gather it up; You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good. You hide Your face, they are dismayed; You take away their spirit, they expire and return to the dust.’”

“Well, I guess that means that animals owe their very lives to God, then,” said Philippe.

Isaiah continued, “Look further with me to Job 38:39-41, which reads, ‘Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their dens and lie in wait in their lair? Who prepares for the raven its nourishment when its young cry to God and wander about without food?’”

Esaiah continued flipping through his Bible for another passage. Eventually, he stopped and said, “Look also at Matthew 6:26, where Jesus says, ‘Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?’”

“All this talk about God feeding the animals makes me hungry!” joked Philippe.

“But, so far we have talked about the weather and God providing for the needs of the wild animals,” said Koffi. “Are there more passages that describe events or the everyday affairs of people?”

“Of course, Koffi. There are many more passages. I simply wish to give you a thorough understanding of what we are saying,” replied Esaiah.

“Okay, let’s continue then,” said Koffi.

“Nothing is by mere chance,” said Esaiah. “In fact, while everything moves according to certain natural laws, God is also involved at every level.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Philippe.

Esaiah answered, “Proverbs 16:33 says, ‘The lot is cast in the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.’”

“What does that mean, ‘the lot is cast in the lap?’” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“The verse is talking about throwing dice. That is what it means by ‘lot cast in the lap,’” explained Esaiah.

“So, what you are saying is that there is human participation in an action, as in this case, casting dice, but that God determines the outcome?” said Philippe.

“That is exactly what I am saying. That is why I say that the second leg of the riddle refers to a sort of cooperation between God’s direction and creation’s participation,” Esaiah said.

“That sounds like a contradiction!” exclaimed Marie-Noëlle.

“That is why there are three stones in the riddle of God’s providence,” explained Esaiah. “To focus on one stone at the expense of the others means that everything will topple and fall over because our understanding of this great mystery is inadequate and focuses on one aspect to the neglect of everything else.”

Koffi nodded his head. For the first time, he was beginning to marvel at the wisdom of his uncle on the subject of God's providence.

"What else in creation reveals this cooperation between God and His creation?" Koffi asked.

"Good question!" Esaiiah said. "There are so many things that Scripture mentions that I wonder if we have time to consider all of them and have time to discuss the third stone."

"Don't worry, Uncle," said Marie-Noëlle. "We have the time, and we want to hear what you have to say." Koffi gulped inwardly, not wanting to say anything about the fact that he had not even begun to prepare for his response to M. Amekudzie. Then again, listening to his uncle explain Scripture was giving him the preparation that he so desperately needed.

"We can look at the affairs of governments across the world. On the one hand, our world rulers make decisions; yet on the other hand, God is directing events across the world stage," said Esaiiah.

"How do you see it like that?" asked Philippe. Koffi thought of the news reports his uncle listened to on his short-wave radio about world affairs. Every day, there was so much corruption, dishonesty, violence, and discord. Koffi wondered how God could have anything to do with it.

Esaiiah said, "Let's look first at Job 12:23. Scripture reads, 'He makes nations great, then destroys them; He enlarges the nations, then leads them away.'"

"So then, what if a nation is destroyed by an enemy invader? Is God responsible for that?" asked Koffi.

"Again, we are talking about the second stone in our riddle. Remember: we are talking about a delicate dance between the free decisions of the rulers that are simultaneously guided by God's sovereign hand," answered Esaiiah.

Esaiiah continued, "If that passage in Job was not clear enough, consider Psalm 22:28, 'For the kingdom is the LORD's and He rules over the nations.' Also, there is Proverbs 21:9, 'The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.'"

"I have never heard that passage until today!" exclaimed Philippe. "That really is a mystery. How kings and rulers in our world make decisions and yet, at the same time, God is directing them."

Esaiah said, “We can continue. Acts 17:26 reads, ‘And He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation.’ And again, in Daniel 4:34-35, ‘But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have you done?’”

“So, the passage in Daniel is talking about a pagan king who acknowledges how God reigns over all the nations of the world?” asked Philippe.

“Yes, Philippe. That is the conclusion that this passage is wanting us to make from it,” answered Esaiah.

“So then, God really is in charge of the decisions that kings and the rulers of the world make even as they issue those orders themselves of their own decision,” said Marie-Noëlle. Koffi acknowledged that the whole idea of both realities, God’s direction and human free-will cooperating together, seemed to be a difficult riddle to solve.

“Exactly. You have to accept that both realities exist simultaneously. It may seem like a contradiction, but to God it is not,” Esaiah said.

“But then, if it looks like a contradiction, sounds like a contradiction, and acts like a contradiction, shouldn’t we accept it as such, as a contradiction?” asked Philippe.

Koffi inwardly admitted to himself that what Philippe said seemed to be a much simpler explanation. Then again, maybe the reality of God and His relationship to the world defied any simple explanation. He waited to hear how Uncle Esaiah would respond to Philippe’s question.

“Philippe, there are many things in Christian belief that defy our explanation. For example, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the human writers of the Bible to such an extent that the Scriptures are without error, even down to the choice of words. But on the other hand, we also believe that the individual authors expressed their unique personalities in their writings. So, which is it, then? Did the Holy Spirit inspire the human authors down to the selection of

individual words or did the authors show their own personality in their writings?”

Philippe shook his head. “I cannot say.”

Esaiah said, “They are both true! But they seem to be mutually exclusive of one another. But here is another Christian belief that defies our human understanding. We believe that Jesus is one hundred percent God, do we not?”

Koffi, Marie-Noëlle, and Philippe nodded their heads.

Esaiah said, “But it doesn’t stop there. We also believe that Jesus is one hundred percent human, which is true. But which is it? Is Jesus one hundred percent God or is He one hundred percent human? After all, something cannot be one hundred percent one thing and one hundred percent something else. Imagine that I have three plastic water bottles. One is empty, but the other two contain two entirely different liquids; one is filled with milk and the other is filled with Malta. If I pour both equal-size bottles of milk and Malta into the same-sized empty plastic bottle, what will happen? Will they both fill up the container?”

Koffi shook his head. “No, if you pour the two bottles at the same time, both will empty half-way into the third bottle. Then the bottles of milk and Malta would start to run over.”

Esaiah nodded. “Exactly. But why? Can’t the empty bottle contain one hundred percent milk and one hundred percent Malta?”

Philippe shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way; something cannot be one hundred percent one thing and one hundred percent another.”

Esaiah said, “But that is what we believe about Jesus Christ! It seems to be a contradiction, but it is the truth about Him.”

“Uncle, what does this have to do with God’s providence over all things?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“It has everything to do with it! Think, inasmuch as we may think that it is contradictory to believe that God controls all events and that we, simultaneously, make free choices and are held morally accountable for them, it is no less contradictory than what we believe about the Bible and about the incarnation of Jesus Christ,” Esaiah said.



All at once, it seemed to Koffi that he finally understood what Esaiiah was trying to say. He grasped the profundity, the mystery, and the truth that God was sovereign over all things even as his human creatures were free and responsible agents accountable for their own actions.

“And so, the third stone is the reality that God determines all things,” Koffi said.

“You are learning, Koffi,” Esaiiah responded.

Philippe seemed like he was beginning to understand. “So those are the three stones that you mentioned in the riddle, Uncle? The riddle that you told us, ‘With one stone it cannot stand; with two stones, it will fall over; with three stones, it will stand.’ The first stone is the truth that God sustains everything that exists. The second stone is the truth that God permits His creation to act on its own even as He guides it toward His own purposes. And the third truth is that God is in control of everything.”

Esaiiah nodded. “You understand the truths and the mystery of God’s providence over all things,” he said.

“And so, we pray because we are free and responsible agents, even as we appeal to God’s providential care over His creation. The two are not contradictions after all. They actually work together,” said Koffi.

“This knowledge is more than I think that I can handle all at once,” said Marie-Noëlle.

“Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways . . . For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen,” Esaiiah said, paraphrasing from Romans 11:33-36.

## Chapter Nine Questions

1. What are the three stones upon which the Christian (Protestant Evangelical) understanding of providence stands?

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2. Why are all three stones interdependent? What would happen if you removed one stone or emphasized one stone above the others?

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3. Why is it an error for somebody to say that any notion of God's providence is absolutely impossible because it would destroy human free will?

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## CHAPTER 10

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### **REPENTANCE AND FAITH - WHOSE DECISION, OURS OR GOD'S?**

Koffi continued thinking over what Uncle Esaiiah had explained about providence. What Esaiiah said made sense. But then, another thought occurred to Koffi. He knew that this subject was probably loaded with discussion and controversy, but at the same time, he wanted to know what his uncle had to say. Koffi also wondered how Marie-Noëlle and Phillippe would respond to his question. Despite his reservations, Koffi decided that he would ask his uncle anyway.

“Uncle, what you have said about providence makes a lot of sense. However, how does that apply to us when we make a decision to follow Jesus Christ?” Koffi asked. Uncle Esaiiah had a gleam in his eye as he looked at his nephew.

“You mean, what does the Bible say about predestination and our salvation. Is that what you are asking?” said Esaiiah.

“Yes, I suppose so,” replied Koffi.

Phillippe groaned loudly once Koffi affirmed the subject of his question. Marie-Noëlle remained silent yet looked very thoughtful at both Uncle Esaiiah and Koffi. The response was about what Koffi had expected. Still, he did not know when he would have another opportunity to ask questions like this again, and he decided that now was as good a time as any to seek his uncle’s wisdom on this subject.

Uncle Esaiiah sat for a long moment without saying a word. Koffi wondered if he should say something but thought better of it. Phillippe and Marie-Noëlle likewise remained silent, anticipating Esaiiah’s response to Koffi’s question. Finally, Esaiiah began to speak.

“Koffi, the subject that you mention is a very difficult one. People wiser and more learned than I have debated opposite sides of this discussion for over a thousand years. I will give you my response but realize that there is no way that we are going to resolve this matter in a few minutes.”

“Is this really even a useful discussion?” Philippe asked. “I mean, this whole topic sounds like something that two theology professors would sit down and discuss over some hot tea. But the average churchgoer would not find any value or importance in this matter.”

“I do not agree,” said Eisaiah. “If anything is mentioned in the Bible, then it is important, as well as useful, for the life of the church. And the Bible does mention predestination in several places.”

“So then, we are predestined to believe and follow Jesus?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

Eisaiah smiled at her. “There is no question, the Bible talks about predestination,” he said. “The real issue is what it *means* when it discusses the subject of predestination.”

“Then which is it, then?” said Philippe. “Does the Bible say that we are chosen by God to believe in Him, or does it say that our decision to follow Jesus is of our own free will?”

“Yes,” Eisaiah said.

Philippe’s mouth opened to say something, but then Philippe fell silent as Koffi and Marie-Noëlle laughed in response to Eisaiah’s answer. Apparently, the answer to the question was bigger than a simple either/or. They wondered how Eisaiah would explain this mystery to them. So far this evening, he had not failed to disappoint.

“First, it is important to note those passages that affirm the subject of predestination. One place to start can be Romans 8:28-30,” said Eisaiah. Flipping through his bible, Eisaiah then read aloud: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Koffi wondered, “Doesn’t the fact that God foreknew those that He predestined mean that He saw in advance those that would follow Jesus anyway?” Philippe nodded his assent to the question.

“That depends on how we define foreknowledge, Koffi,” Esaiiah said. “By some accounts, foreknowledge is little more than an awareness of the events that are going to happen before they do.”

“But that seems to be the idea behind foreknowledge, doesn’t it?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“What matters is not what we think it means but what the Bible means when it uses words like foreknowledge. And the truth is that foreknowledge, as the Bible uses it, means much more than a basic understanding of events before they occur,” said Esaiiah.

“So then, what else is suggested by the word ‘foreknowledge’ in the Bible?” asked Koffi.

“Foreknowledge means an intimate relationship with another. In fact, foreknowledge and predestination are inseparable from one another,” said Esaiiah.

“I am not sure that I completely understand,” said Koffi, “but is that the only reference to predestination in the Bible or are there other passages?”

“Many more, Koffi,” Esaiiah said. “But before I mention others, please let me explain what Romans 8:28-30 seems to be saying. Many refer to this passage as the ‘golden chain of salvation.’ Consider this: from foreknowledge all the way to glorification, does it seem like any of those who belong to Christ are lost?”

“What do you mean?” asked Philippe.

“What I mean is, of all those who are foreknown, are a smaller number predestined? And of those predestined, are a smaller number called? And of those called, are a smaller number justified? And among those justified, are a smaller number glorified?” Esaiiah said.

“It looks like it’s the same number right on through foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification,” said Marie-Noëlle.

“Wait a minute!” said Philippe. “By ‘calling,’ in this passage, I assume that Paul is talking about the call to respond in faith to Jesus Christ. Is that correct?”

Esaiiah nodded. “It is,” he said.

Philippe continued, “Then by that understanding, everyone called is also everyone who is justified, just as they are the ones who were foreknown and predestined beforehand. And it is they who will be glorified.”

“It is all connected, isn’t it, Philippe?” said Esaiah. “It is what Jesus meant in John 6:37, that ‘all whom the Father has given me shall come to me, and the one who comes to Me I certainly will not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of everything that He has given Me I will lose nothing but will raise it up on the last day.’”

“Yet another passage about predestination, only it doesn’t call it that,” said Koffi.

“But are there other passages about predestination besides these two?” said Marie-Noëlle.

“Another passage that is very clear about predestination is Ephesians 1:3-5.” As he flipped through his Bible, Esaiah stopped and then read aloud, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love, He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.”

“Wow. It doesn’t get any plainer than that,” Koffi said. “I mean, phrases like ‘chose us in Him before the foundation of the world,’ and ‘In love He predestined us...’ sound very convincing.”

“But how do we reconcile those passages with verses like Romans 10:11 that says, ‘Whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame?’ And what about Revelation 22:17, when it says, ‘Whosoever will, let him take from the water of life freely,’” Philippe said.

“I am also thinking of 2 Peter 3:9-11, ‘The LORD is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.’ Also, 1 Timothy 2:3-4, ‘This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,’” said Koffi.

“It seems like people on both sides of this issue can assemble their own list of Bible passages to support their point of view,” said Marie-Noëlle. “I wonder where the truth is in the middle of all these seeming contradictory passages.”

“That is the real issue,” said Esaiah. “We can sit back and rest content with our own little list of proof texts and remain blissfully unaware of the other

side's equally valid list of proof texts. The task of a real student of the Bible, the mark of a disciple, is how we strive to reconcile all of these passages."

"But can we? I mean, is it possible?" said Philippe.

"If we truly believe that the Bible presents a unified message that is free from error, then yes, it is possible, Philippe," Esaiah said.

"So, what is the solution, Uncle," Koffi asked. He was wondering how his uncle was going to reconcile two truths that seemed to be at odds with each other.

Esaiah responded, "We should begin by answering the question, 'Did we become regenerate at the moment we expressed faith in Christ, or did regeneration make it possible for us to express faith in Christ?'"

"Why is that important?" asked Philippe.

Koffi had an idea. "Because our answer to that question will tell us, ultimately, whether it is God who chooses us or it is we who choose God," he said.

Esaiah clapped his hands. "Exactly!" he said to Koffi. Marie-Noëlle beamed at Koffi while Philippe looked thoughtful upon hearing Koffi's words.

"So, which is it then?" said Marie-Noëlle.

Esaiah smiled. "Well," he said while searching his Bible, "the first passage is found in I Corinthians 2:14 'But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.'"

Everyone stopped and considered the implications of what Esaiah had just read. It seemed as if, by that one passage, Esaiah had answered the question that they had all been considering together.

"It certainly helps us understand 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, 'And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they will not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God,'" replied Marie-Noëlle.

"Well, that's one passage," said Philippe. "Is that it, or are there any other passages?"

Esaiah chuckled. "We have only just begun, Philippe!" he said.

“Please don’t stop. Tell us how we resolve this subject,” said Koffi.

Esaiah continued, “We also have to consider those passages that show the complexity of God’s rulership and our personal freedom. One big example is Philippians 2:12-13.” Esaiah continued flipping through his Bible until his finger rested on the passage.

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure.”

Koffi scratched his head. “I’m not sure that I understand what Paul means by that. I also don’t see how those verses have any relevance to predestination.”

Philippe murmured his agreement to what Koffi just said. Marie-Noëlle remained silent, her eyes lowered, waiting for Esaiah to respond.

Esaiah responded, “First, let’s understand what this passage is saying before we discuss its relevance to predestination. Do you know what Paul means when he says, ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling?’”

“No, actually. I thought that Paul had written to the Ephesians that we are saved ‘by grace through faith, and not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works so that no one may boast,’” said Philippe.

Koffi nodded.

“Well, you’re right, Philippe. Paul is not telling the Philippians to merit salvation by all the good things that they do. Ephesians 2:8-9 makes that very clear. What he is telling them to do is to continue growing in their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, thereby demonstrating the reality that they are, indeed, saved by God,” said Esaiah.

“That sounds like Paul is putting a lot of emphasis on our individual responsibility and personal choice,” said Marie-Noëlle. Koffi and Philippe nodded at her words.

“But it doesn’t stop there!” said Esaiah. “Look at the very next verse: ‘for it is *God* who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure.’”



“Okay, now I’m confused!” said Marie-Noëlle. Koffi shared her feelings. He imagined that Philippe was in the same state of mind as well even if he did not say anything.

Esaiah chuckled. “That’s the point!” he said. “Paul is illustrating the complexity and the mystery of God’s rulership over all creation and our personal responsibility. First, he tells us to assume responsibility for ourselves in how we grow as Christians. Then he turns right around and says that our actions and even our willingness to do them originated from God Himself!”

“So then, which is it? Do we make decisions to follow Jesus ourselves or does God make us?” asked Philippe.

“Yes!” shouted Esaiah.

Philippe looked even more frustrated. “That response does not help!” he said, dejectedly.

“But it is the correct response,” said Koffi, who thought that he was finally beginning to see what his Uncle Esaiah was trying to tell them.

Esaiah looked expectant at Koffi. “Tell us why you think it is so, Koffi,” he said.

“I mean, I think that our problem is that we are limited, finite creatures trying to explain eternity, something that is outside of time and unlimited. When we attempt to explain the unexplainable in finite terms, we run into what seems to be a contradiction,” Koffi said.

Esaiah nodded. “There is a riddle, ‘Which came first, the chicken or the egg?’”

“What does that mean?” asked Marie-Noëlle.

“It shows how some questions are unsolvable according to our conventional understanding. If you reply, ‘the chicken came first,’ then you have to explain where the chicken came from. And if you say, ‘the egg,’ then you have to answer how that egg came about with no hens to lay it in the first place,” Esaiah said.

“And what does this riddle have to do with the question of predestination?” Philippe asked.

“It has everything to do with predestination!” Koffi said. “Remember the question that Uncle Esaiah asked us, ‘Did we become regenerate at the moment we expressed faith in Christ, or did regeneration make it possible for us to ex-

press faith in Christ?’ It is just another way of asking, ‘which came first, the chicken or the egg!’”

Understanding suddenly seemed to dawn on both Philippe’s and Marie-Noëlle’s faces.

Philippe jumped up from the stool on which he had been sitting during their evening discussion. “So then, the decision to believe in Jesus Christ is a personal decision that we all must make!”

Esaiah nodded in agreement. “Of course, that is why Joshua 2:15 says, ‘Choose you this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.’”

Koffi added, “And why Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, ‘If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.’”

“But on the other hand, none of us would have made that decision unless God performed some sort of supernatural transformation in our hearts that enabled us to make that decision in the first place,” said Marie-Noëlle.

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it is coming from and where it is going; so is everyone who has been born of the Spirit,” Esaiah said softly.

“So that is how we reconcile passages that urge us to repent and believe with those like John 6:37, where Jesus says, ‘all whom the Father has given me shall come to me, and the one who comes to Me I certainly will not cast out,’” said Koffi.

“Or, I suppose, I Corinthians 2:14: ‘But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned,’” said Philippe.

“So how would we express what all of these passages are saying, I mean the ones that tell us to make a personal decision and those that say that we can’t decide to follow Jesus apart from God drawing us?” asked Koffi.

Esaiah said, “I believe that we should start by saying that every human being is held responsible for making a decision whether or not to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, no matter what.”

Koffi, Philippe, and Marie-Noëlle nodded.

Esaiah continued, “At the same time, apart from the supernatural activity of God, working through his Holy Spirit, none of us is capable of making that decision for Jesus. The fact that we do is a demonstration of God’s grace working in us. Without that grace, none of us would believe.”

“But why does that grace work in some and not others? Are you saying that God only does this supernatural saving work of grace upon a limited number of people?” asked Philippe.

Koffi and Marie-Noëlle froze. Koffi had not thought of what Philippe had just said. Could God really be like that? Is that the action of a holy, just God?

Esaiah smiled. “Philippe, that is what makes this topic so controversial. There are those who say that anyone who suggests that God chooses some and passes over others is making God into some sort of monster. Why doesn’t He save everybody if He can?” Esaiah said.

“That is certainly what I am beginning to think,” Philippe said.

“But consider what we have already discussed,” Esaiah said. “When we talked about Romans 8:28-29, we talked about the ‘golden chain of salvation.’”

Koffi remembered. “We noticed that every link in that ‘golden chain,’ is connected. Nothing comes short. Those whom God foreknew, He predestines; those whom he predestines, He calls; those whom He calls, He justifies; and those whom He justifies, He glorifies.”

Esaiah nodded. “And Ephesians 1:3 says that God *chose us* in Him before the foundation of the world.”

“But what kind of a God would choose to save some and then leave the rest to go to hell? That hardly sounds just,” said Philippe.

Esaiah said, “Philippe, turn with me to Romans 9. Paul dealt with those same kinds of objections about God’s election and predestination. At the end of chapter eight he just explained how election was the assurance that the salvation that we receive cannot be taken away. It was determined before the world began; nothing can take it away from us.”

“I remember, Uncle, but it still doesn’t seem right,” said Philippe.

“Well, Paul knew that his readers would remember that the nation of Israel had received those same promises of being a chosen people. Yet most of the

Jews were not repenting and believing in Jesus Christ. That reality seemed to make the whole idea of election uncertain,” Esaiah said.

“So how did Paul explain it, then?” said Koffi. Now he was wondering if election was as certain as Esaiah had made it seem.

“Paul went on to explain in Romans 9:6-9 that the true Israel was all who believed in Jesus Christ, whether they were ethnic Jew or Gentile. And the promises of election were not for all ethnic Jews, but only for those among the ethnic Jews whom God had predestined for salvation,” Esaiah explained.

Koffi, Philippe, and Marie-Noëlle exclaimed at hearing their uncle’s words.

Esaiah grinned. “That was what Paul was trying to explain. But he sought to explain one hard reality with an even more difficult reality to face. But then he replies to the objections that he knows are coming in verses fourteen through twenty-nine.”

“So, what does he say, then?” asked Philippe.

“Well, the first objection is the one that you mentioned, Philippe,” Esaiah said. “Verses fourteen through eighteen read, ‘What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? Far from it! For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I have mercy, and I will show compassion to whomever I show compassion.’ So then, it does not depend on the person who wants it nor the one who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very reason I raised you up, in order to demonstrate my power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the earth.’ So then, He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.”

“Philippe, the answer that I gave to one of Koffi’s earlier questions about those who have yet to hear the name of Jesus Christ also applies here. You appeal to God’s fairness. Another way of putting it would be to say that God must show justice. But here is the problem: Demand justice and, if God grants it, then everybody burns in hell. But if God shows grace, He is under no obligation to render grace to everybody. Then it is no longer grace. So then, if God shows grace to some and not others, we are in no position to say that God is somehow being unfair.”

“But how can those who never chose Jesus ever say that they were judged fairly? How can they overcome the decision that God made in eternity?” Philippe said.

Esaiah's eyes opened wide. "That is exactly the next objection that Paul writes a response, Philippe. Listen to what Paul writes in Romans 9:19-23, 'You will say to me then, 'Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?' On the contrary, who are you, you foolish person, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does the potter not have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one object for honorable use, and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with great patience objects of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon objects of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.'"

"Okay, I get it. We don't have any right to question God in his decision. But what is the value in this whole discussion? What benefit does it have for the average guy who attends services at a church?" said Philippe.

"Plenty of practical value," Esaiah said. "First of all, predestination helps us understand that salvation is completely of grace. Without God's predestination, none of us would believe. That means that predestination is all of grace."

"I suppose that it would also mean that even our decision to repent and believe is not something that we did on our own, as if our own wisdom and intelligence allowed us to become Christians," said Koffi.

"Exactly!" said Esaiah.

"But I have one last question," said Marie-Noëlle. "Does predestination discourage evangelism and missions since God is already going to save everybody that He has already predestined to salvation?"

"Yes, yes!" said Philippe.

"Marie-Noëlle, I would answer that question in the same way that we answered the question if God's providence hinders prayer. God not only ordains or establishes the end but also the means. And the means by which those whom God chose before the foundation of the world to be saved is by faithful members of the church of Jesus Christ to proclaim the gospel to them," Esaiah said.

"So then, whatever you believe about predestination, the command to make disciples cannot be done away," said Koffi.

"Exactly," said Esaiah.

“So then, God ordained that we would proclaim the gospel, but we have a moral responsibility to act upon His command to make disciples. And we should proclaim the gospel to everyone in the world. And those who hear the message of the gospel are morally responsible for the decision that they make about Jesus Christ. But only those whom God chose before the foundation of the world will respond in faith and repentance in Jesus Christ,” said Koffi.

““Oh, the depths of the riches, both the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen,”” said Isaiah.

## Chapter Ten Questions

1. What does the Bible say about human free will and responsibility? How does this vision relate to the freedom to choose Jesus Christ in faith and obedience?

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2. How do divine rulership and human responsibility relate to one another? Are they mutually exclusive? Why or why not

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3. Why is it an error for somebody to say that the very idea of predestination is absolutely impossible because it would destroy the motivation to do evangelism?

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## CONCLUSION

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Koffi sat back, reflecting on everything that he and his family had discussed with his Uncle Esaiah during this evening. He then remembered that he had not even begun to work on his report for M. Amekudzie. He took his Nokia phone out of his pocket and checked the time. It was ten PM. He had no time left for discussion.

“Uncle, thank you so much for all that you have taught us this evening. I really need to start on my presentation for class tomorrow,” Koffi said.

Esaiah chuckled, saying, “I was wondering when you were going to start to work on it. Well, I hope that what we have discussed will give you the information that you need for your teacher.”

Koffi said, “Uncle, it will help me in far more than just tomorrow’s presentation.”

Taking his leave, Koffi sat by the security light just outside the door to the attendant building where he and his family resided inside the compound. Taking out his pen, Koffi began to write furiously into his notebook, recalling what Uncle Esaiah had told him during their conversation. While he could not remember every Scripture reference nor every nuance of his uncle’s teaching, Koffi could recall the highlights that were relevant to M. Amekudzie’s assignment. In about an hour, Koffi had filled several thin-lined pages in his notebook. He capped his pen and put away his books into his bookbag. He checked the time: 11:30 PM. He could maybe catch about five hours of sleep before he had to rise and prepare for school. Class started at six AM, so he needed to get all the sleep that he could.

The next morning, Koffi rose at four-thirty and dressed quickly. As he made his way to the gate leading outside the compound, Uncle Esaiah met him and gave him enough money to purchase a baguette filled with a fried egg. Koffi could not believe that Uncle Esaiah was being so generous.

“Thank you so much, Uncle,” Koffi said.

“You will want to keep up your strength when you give your presentation,” Esaiiah said with a grin. “You also do not want to face the class and your teacher on an empty stomach.”

Walking outside the compound and shutting the gate, Koffi found a street vendor selling baguettes and frying eggs with onions for people hurrying to work. Already, there was a taxi driver who had stopped and was purchasing a baguette as he continued driving passengers. Koffi made his purchase and continued walking with other students the three kilometer road to their school building.

Along the way, Koffi ate his baguette and rehearsed to himself what he was going to say during his presentation. No doubt, M. Amekudzie was not going to like what Koffi would have to say. But, Koffi considered, what was more important to him was what God thought about it and not what his teacher said about it. Still, Koffi prayed as he walked. He prayed, first, for the presentation and that he could recall everything important that Uncle Esaiiah had told him. While there was no way that Koffi could present everything that his family had discussed under the mango tree yesterday, he could definitely select the pertinent details that would answer all of the questions that M. Amekudzie expected an answer.

As he prayed, Koffi prayed specifically for M. Amekudzie. Despite the humiliation that his teacher had given him, Koffi did not hold any bitterness or hard feelings against his teacher. In truth, Koffi felt sorry for his teacher who seemed to hold a great deal of resentment about the direction that his life had taken. M. Amekudzie did not really hate Koffi; he was really lashing out at Koffi for all the injustices that he felt that he had suffered in life. Rather than justice, Koffi wanted to extend grace to M. Amekudzie.

As Koffi finished his sandwich and adjusted the bookbag strap on his shoulder, he continued walking. Whatever happened today, whether he succeeded or failed in his presentation, Koffi knew that he was being faithful in his witness to Jesus Christ. And that was enough.

“I know in whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day,” Koffi muttered, recalling 2 Timothy 1:12 as he continued along the roadside to school.

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## COMPARISON CHART

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Words don't have intrinsic definitions but rather definitions are simply commonly accepted descriptions about a word. This can become quite a challenge when those from differing worldviews are trying to discuss the same topic. The challenge of understanding one another becomes painfully obvious when the realization comes that though the actual words are the same, the definitions are very different.

For example, a Christian may try and persuade his Muslim friend to repent and believe in Jesus. As part of that persuasion the Christian may say, "If you put your faith in Christ, you will spend eternity in heaven."

But the question must be asked as to what is this Muslim man's concept of heaven. For him, doesn't it involve endless worldly pleasures of sex, food and drink? Is this what the Christian was promising his friend should he trust in Christ? Of course not but this is a simple example of why precision is necessary.

One of the key features of the Africa Theological Series is to highlight major differences between Evangelical Christianity and other religions. Those other religions are the major faith systems found on the African continent and include Islam, Roman Catholicism, and African Traditional Religion (ATR).

Many of the groups would, on the outside, seem quite similar. Each would profess belief in a Creator God. However, we must go deeper than the surface and the purpose of this chart is to highlight major differences in these religion's understanding of who God is.

Each of these religions are complex and actual belief is more caveated than the following generalizations found in this chart. The goal is not an exhaustive treatment of these faith systems but rather a highlighting of the normal or most commonly beliefs held by the majority of adherents.

This is especially challenging with ATR since it is not a confessional/credal faith with an agreed upon set of beliefs. Instead, ATR represents myriads of religious beliefs held across the continent. Therefore, the following chart will attempt to summarize normal doctrinal positions held by the majority of those in ATR.



		<b>Evangelical Christianity</b>	<b>Islam</b>	<b>Africa Traditional Religion</b>	<b>Roman Catholicism</b>
<b>Who is God?</b>	Yahweh is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. There is but one living and true God and there are three persons in the godhead (the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit). These three are one God, the same in essence, equal in power and glory.	Allah is the only deity and he is absolutely one, unique, and perfect, free from all faults, deficiencies and defects. He is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and completely infinite in all of His attributes, who has no partner or equal, being the sole creator of everything in existence.	African Traditional Religions (ATR) believe in a Supreme God above all other deities, nature spirits, and ancestor spirits. But, this supreme god is distant and remote, unlike the God of evangelical Christianity.	Officially would share the same doctrinal view of God as Evangelicals but are informed by church fathers, church councils, creeds and the writings of the pope which exerts the same authority as the Scripture.	
<b>The Knowability of God</b>	God's infinity in relation to time and space (Ps. 90:2, Ps. 139:7-12) tells us as finite creatures that there will always be more about God that we do not know, nor will ever know. God is simply too big for our limited understanding. This does not mean that we will never know anything meaningful about God. God has revealed Himself to us (Heb. 1:1). God's immensity causes us to worship Him as vastly above our limited powers of understanding.	Much about God is unknowable (Quran 18: 109). Of the ninety-nine names for Allah in the Quran, one of them is Al-Batin, the Hidden, Unmanifest One. Yet another name for Allah is Al-Zahir, the Manifest One. This name implies that believers can know Allah, at least in part and imperfectly.	Ultimately, the Supreme God is unknowable in African Traditional Religions. What matters most to adherents of ATR is not knowing the Supreme God but placating and gaining favors from local spirits and the spirits of ancestors.	Officially would share the same doctrinal view of God as Evangelicals but are informed by church fathers, church councils, creeds and the writings of the pope which exerts the same authority as the Scripture.	
<b>The Purpose of Knowing God</b>	God created human beings in order to have a relationship with us. Sin creates a divide between human beings and God. We strive to know God in order to become more like Him and to follow His ways, not in order to gain special powers or privileges, though. Evangelical Christianity teaches that people receive blessings in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.	The purpose of knowing more about Allah is so that believers know how to submit to Allah's will.	African Traditional Religions do not pursue knowing the Supreme God. In fact, adherents of ATR generally do not try to know the Supreme God. What is important to them is obtaining protection and material blessing in this life.	Officially would share the same doctrinal view of God as Evangelicals but are informed by church fathers, church councils, creeds and the writings of the pope which exerts the same authority as the Scripture.	



	<p><b>Evangelical Christianity</b></p> <p>God is completely unlike us in more ways than He is like us. God is unlike us in that He is completely self-sufficient. God is unlike us in that He does not change. God is unlike us in that He is eternal with respect to time. God is also unlike us in that He is eternal with regard to space, meaning that His presence is everywhere.</p>	<p><b>Islam</b></p> <p>Islam teaches that there are twenty Sifat (attributes) of Allah, many of which are similar to what we call the incommunicable attributes of God (qualities of God that are unlike anything in creation) in Christian theology.</p>	<p><b>Africa Traditional Religion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>African Traditional Religions (ATR) do not have a highly developed system of doctrines, including the doctrine of God.</li> <li>As such, ATR religious leaders do not discuss matters such as God is different from us.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Roman Catholicism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protestant and Catholic beliefs about the incommunicable attributes of God (ways in which God is unlike anything in His creation) are similar, the only difference is the starting point, i.e., creation for Catholics, Scripture for Protestants.</li> </ul>
<p><b>How God is not like us (Incommunicable Attributes of God)</b></p>	<p>Because humanity is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), there are some ways in which God is like us. One way that God is like us is in morality or our inner sense of right and wrong. While there are cultural differences, there is greater fundamental agreement than there is disagreement. Our notions of justice, right and wrong, would not be possible if God did not share this quality with us.</p>	<p>Islam emphatically upholds the principle of <i>Alla waḥ-daa miyah</i>, the Sifat (attribute) of Allah that refers to His oneness, uniqueness, without resemblance. To suggest that Allah shares attributes that are similar to human beings or creation in general would be unthinkable to Muslims.</p>	<p>African Traditional Religions (ATR) do not have a highly developed system of doctrines concerning the Supreme God, minor deities, nature spirits, and ancestor spirits. As such, ATR religious leaders do not discuss matters like the moral attributes of the Supreme God.</p>	<p>Officially would share the same doctrinal views of God as Evangelicals but are informed by church fathers, church councils, creeds and the writings of the pope which exerts the same authority as the Scripture.</p>
<p><b>How God is like us morally (Communicable Attributes of God)</b></p>	<p>God is like us not only morally, but also in the ways that we think and will. God knows all things (Ps. 139; Lk. 3:20) while our knowledge is not like God's, we can know and understand God and the world around us. God is all-wise (Romans 16:27; 1 Cor. 18:25; James 1:5). Human beings also demonstrate a capacity to develop wisdom in part. Wisdom, the application of knowledge is our ability to apply what knowledge that we possess.</p>	<p>Islam emphatically upholds the principle of <i>Alla waḥ-daa miyah</i>, the Sifat (attribute) of Allah that refers to His oneness, uniqueness, without resemblance. To suggest that Allah shares attributes that are similar to human beings or creation in general would be unthinkable to Muslims.</p>	<p>African Traditional Religions (ATR) do not have a highly developed system of doctrines concerning the Supreme God, minor deities, nature spirits, and ancestor spirits. As such, ATR religious leaders do not discuss matters like the moral attributes of the Supreme God.</p>	<p>Officially would share the same doctrinal views of God as Evangelicals but are informed by church fathers, church councils, creeds and the writings of the pope which exerts the same authority as the Scripture.</p>
<p><b>How God is like us intellectually (Communicable Attributes of God)</b></p>	<p>God exists as a Trinity (Matt. 28:19:20); this teaching is one of the essential beliefs of Christianity. It is also important in that it helps to explain how we believe that there is one God and also preach the divinity of Jesus Christ at the same time. God is one (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 6:4; Is. 45:5-6). Besides God, there is no other. Christians believe that there is only one God.</p>	<p>Islam emphatically rejects the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is a prophet, but still a mere man. Quran 5:17 "In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary."</p>	<p>African Traditional Religions (ATR) do not discuss doctrines like the Trinity.</p>	<p>Officially would share the same doctrinal views of God as Evangelicals but are informed by church fathers, church councils, creeds and the writings of the pope which exerts the same authority as the Scripture.</p>
<p><b>The Trinity</b></p>				





	<b>Evangelical Christianity</b>	<b>Islam</b>	<b>Africa Traditional Religion</b>	<b>Roman Catholicism</b>
<b>God's Sovereignty</b>	<p>The providence of God is a profound mystery. We cannot claim to understand it completely. However, we can strive to understand in part based on what Scripture tells us about this subject.</p>	<p>Islam and Christianity appear to have at least similar notions of providence. The biggest difference between Christianity and Islam is that the New Testament teaches that Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection were according to the predetermined plan of God. Acts 2:23 "This Man [Jesus Christ], delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."</p>	<p>African Traditional Religions (ATR) do not have a highly developed doctrine of providence. As such, ATR religious leaders do not discuss matters such as the God's sovereignty, the problem of good and evil.</p>	<p>The Roman Catholic understanding of providence is more simplified than the classic Protestant understanding of providence. "Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order."</p>
<b>Man's Responsibility</b>	<p>We must affirm the reality that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. We also are free and morally responsible creatures who must voluntarily choose to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. These two truths are not mutually exclusive nor are they contradictory. How we understand predestination ultimately is demonstrated by how we answer the question, "Did regeneration take place before or after a Christian expressed repentance and faith?"</p>	<p>Al-Qadr, also known as the "Decree", is the basic Islamic belief that Allah has predetermined all events, including the personal decisions that people make, which is predestination. Al-Qadr is common among Sunni Muslims.</p>	<p>African Traditional Religions (ATR) do not have a highly developed doctrine of predestination. ATR believers do, however, try to manipulate the future by making sacrifices and doing other practices so that their business will prosper, their crops will be abundant, they will have a healthy child, or have good health. Despite these practices, there is always uncertainty that such blessings will occur or that someone will curse them.</p>	<p>The Roman Catholic understanding of providence and predestination is more simplified than the classic Protestant understanding of providence. At one time, the Catholic Church upheld the teachings of church fathers and African bishops. Augustine, in the 17th century, however, led to a group called Jansenism. Catholics deemed as too close to Protestantism.</p>



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## KEY TERMS

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Below are listed key terminology when it comes to understanding the Doctrine of God. These brief definitions are originally found in Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson's work, *Christian Theology* and have been used here with permission.

<b>Aseity of God</b>	<b>Mercy of God</b>
<b>Attributes of God</b>	<b>Omnipotence of God</b>
<b>Communicable Attributes</b>	<b>Omnipresence of God</b>
<b>Emanationism</b>	<b>Omniscience of God</b>
<b>Eternity of God</b>	<b>Pantheism</b>
<b>Ex Nihilo</b>	<b>Pantheism</b>
<b>Faithfulness of God</b>	<b>Patience of God</b>
<b>Glory of God</b>	<b>Personality of God</b>
<b>Goodness of God</b>	<b>Providence</b>
<b>Grace of God</b>	<b>Righteousness (Justice) of God</b>
<b>Greatness of God</b>	<b>Sovereignty of God</b>
<b>Holiness of God</b>	<b>Spirituality of God</b>
<b>Immutability of God</b>	<b>Trinity</b>
<b>Impassability of God</b>	<b>Truthfulness of God</b>
<b>Incommunicable Attributes</b>	<b>Unity of God</b>
<b>Infinity of God</b>	<b>Wisdom of God</b>
<b>Love of God</b>	

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**ASEITY OF GOD:** the doctrine that God has life within himself and depends on nothing else for his existence. He is the living God, who has existed forever. As Lord, he gives life to all and needs nothing (Jer 2:13; John 5:26; Acts 17:24–25).

**ATTRIBUTES OF GOD:** God's qualities that make him who he is. Clarifications are in order. First, because God is infinite, we will never (even on the new earth) know him exhaustively. Second, because God is eternal, his attributes are too. God always has been and will be loving, holy, good, and so on. Third, God is unified and indivisible. Thus, we distinguish his attributes but do not separate them. This is known as the doctrine of God's simplicity. His attributes are not parts of him. Rather, he is totally sovereign, wise, faithful, and so forth. Fourth, because God is a divine person, we focus not on the attributes but on God himself. Thus, we do not study mercy and power per se, but God as merciful and powerful. Fifth, God has revealed himself, and we can know him truly (but never exhaustively, as the first clarification states). Sixth, although attempts to categorize God's attributes are flawed, many discuss them as incommunicable (unique to him) and communicable (shared with his followers). When we label God's attributes as incommunicable and communicable, the categories overlap, but labeling reminds us of how we relate to God. Often the Bible says that we are not like God, and the incommunicable attributes highlight this. He is Creator, we are creatures; he is infinite, we are finite; and so on. The Bible also says that God created us in his image and that we must reflect him in our lives, and the communicable attributes highlight this.

**COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES:** characteristics of God that he shares with human beings. These include personality, sovereignty, wisdom, truthfulness, faithfulness, holiness, righteousness, love, grace, mercy, goodness, patience, and glory.

**EMANATIONISM:** the belief that the world is an emanation or extension of God himself. Creation, therefore, would be an overflow of God's being. To the contrary, Scripture teaches that the Creator is distinct from his creation. He alone existed from eternity and created the world, and it remains distinct from him.

**ETERNITY OF GOD:** the attribute of the living and true God as the Lord of time. As its Creator, he stands outside of time, not being trapped within it but, rather, controlling it. He also enters into time in order to relate to us, who are time-bound. We face the future with confidence in the eternal God, who both inhabits eternity and dwells with us, his people (Ps 90:4; Isa 40:28–30; Rom 16:26; 1 Tim 1:17).

**EX NIHILO:** Latin phrase applied to creation, meaning “out of nothing.”

Refers to the beginning of God's work of creation, when he used no previously existing material (Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3).

**FAITHFULNESS OF GOD:** God's reliability in his character, actions, and words. He is the faithful God, who keeps his covenant with his people. His faithfulness means he provides for us when we are tempted, forgives us when we repent, and assures us that he will sustain us to the end. That God is faithful means we can fully trust him and his Word in all circumstances (Ps 89:1–3; Lam 3:21–24; 1 Cor 1:8–9; 1 Thess 5:23–24).

**GLORY OF GOD:** God's majesty, worth, beauty, and splendor. At times the term refers to an attribute, or a summary attribute, of God (Ps 24:8–10; Acts 7:2). Glory often expresses God's special presence, as in the glory cloud (Exod 13:21–22; 24:16–18) or the tabernacle (Exod 29:43; 40:34–38). Even more, the glory of God frames the biblical story and world-view. Scripture speaks of God's glory in at least six ways. First, only he has inherent glory (Isa 42:8). Second, God reveals his glory in creation (Ps 19:1), providence (Ps 104:31), human image bearers (Ps 8:4–5), and redemption (Exod 14:13–18; Acts 3:13–15). Third, believers glorify him (Ps 115:1; Rev 19:1). Fourth, God receives their glory (Ps 29:1–2; Rev 4:9–11). Fifth, he shares his glory with believers in salvation (2 Cor 3:18; 2 Thess 2:14). Sixth, all this redounds to God's glory (Rom 11:36)

**GOODNESS OF GOD:** God's care for and kindness toward all his creation, including humans, animals, and wildflowers, as well as his good gifts to both believing and unbelieving humans. God's goodness led Israel to the Promised Land, where he showed special care for the poor. Unlike that of humans, God's goodness lasts forever. He reveals his generosity in creation, but it shines in redemption. We praise God for his goodness and reflect it by loving and praying for enemies (Gen 1:31; Matt 5:45; Acts 14:17; Jas 1:17).

**GRACE OF GOD:** God's deep compassion for all, especially his people, leading to his giving them undeserved favor and thus heaven instead of hell. Grace typifies each person of the Trinity. God is gracious to unbelievers and offers them the gospel. His grace brings salvation in all its glory. God's grace drives the Christian life, for grace is his unmerited love *and* his power, called enabling grace. God's grace pertains to the past, present, and future: we are saved by

God's grace, live by his grace, and long for his grace. His goal is to display his grace forever in his church. We must, then, set our hope on the grace that Christ will bring at his return (Exod 34:6; Ps 84:10–11; Eph 2:4–10; Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 1:13).

**GREATNESS OF GOD:** God's attribute of being of utmost importance and beyond comparison. He alone is the High and Exalted One, and there is no one like him (Exod 15:11). The Lord is unique, especially compared to the so-called gods of the nations, which are really idols (Ps 86:8–10). The Psalms praise God for the greatness of his name and person (Ps(s) 8:1, 9; 148:13) and for the greatness of his works (Ps 145:3–6). God's greatness leads us to fear him (Jer 10:6–7) and to worship him only (Ps 96:3–5; Luke 1:46–48). It moves us to submit to his sovereignty (Ps 135:5–6) and to trust in his covenant faithfulness (Neh 1:5). God's greatness also inspires us to bear witness of him to others (Ps 145:3–6).

**HOLINESS OF GOD:** God's status as both unique and sinless. He is distinct from all else, and there is no one like him. God is also entirely pure and sinless, separate from anything unholy. God's moral holiness exposes our sinfulness and condemns us. But holy God is also full of mercy, and he forgives all who trust his Son as Savior. Further, God commands his redeemed people to live holy lives. We will praise God's holiness for all eternity (Exod 15:11; Ps 99:2–5; Isa 6:3; 1 Pet 1:14–16).

**IMMUTABILITY OF GOD:** God's inability to change in his character or nature. Unlike his changing creation, he is stable (Jas 1:17). God's unchangeableness gives us great security (Ps 102:27–28; Mal 3:6). While his character remains constant, he is also a personal Being who enters into covenant with his people.

**IMPASSABILITY OF GOD:** the reality that God's experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us. We are often surprised by what we encounter, but God is not. What he experiences is within his sovereignty and foreknowledge. Nothing outside of God causes him to change in his nature, knowledge, or will. He cannot be influenced to be unfaithful or to default on his promises. God is not swayed by temptation or sin. But this does not mean that he lacks emotions or does not care about humans and their suffering. He loves righteousness and hates sin (Ps 45:7). He loves a world that hates him, and he sent his Son to save it (John 3:16). That God is both impassible and caring is difficult

to understand because it is a subcategory of the fact that he is infinite and personal.

**INCOMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES:** characteristics of God that are unique to him and that he does not share with human beings. These include aseity, unity, spirituality (God is a spiritual being and has no body), infinity, omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, immutability, and greatness.

**INFINITY OF GOD:** God's attribute of being unlimited in his person and attributes. His infinity with regard to time is his eternity. His infinity with regard to space is his omnipresence. His infinity with regard to power is his omnipotence. His infinity with regard to knowledge is his omniscience (Isa 40:28; Ps 147:5; Eph 1:18–19).

**LOVE OF GOD:** God's desiring others' good and his giving of himself to bring about that good. He cares deeply for humans (Exod 34:6–7), and, since we are rebels, his boundless love for us is undeserved (Ps 103:10–11; Rom 5:8). God's love is great and everlasting; he even loves a world that hates him (Jer 31:3; John 3:16, 19–20). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love one another eternally (John 10:17; 14:31; 17:24). This trinitarian love reaches us as well (John 15:9; Rom 5:5; 1 John 4:10). God's love brings staggering privileges. He welcomes us into his family (1 John 3:1), removes our fear of final judgment (4:17), and assures us that nothing will separate us from his love in Christ (Rom 8:39). God's love also brings great responsibility. Jesus taught, "Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another" (John 13:34). John adds that because God "loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins . . . , we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10–11 ESV).

**MERCY OF GOD:** God's seeing our misery and acting to relieve it. He shows mercy when he sees his people suffering in Egypt and rescues them through Moses. At times God displays mercy by withholding deserved punishment. His mercy, seen in the Old Testament, overflows in the New Testament. This is especially true of Jesus, who has compassion for the weary and lost crowds. Mainly, God's mercy, which excludes human efforts to save oneself, brings salvation. His mercy moves his people to praise him and to show mercy to others (Ps 103:10; Matt 9:36; Eph 4:32; Titus 3:5).

**OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD:** the almighty God's unlimited power to do anything he chooses to do. His being all-powerful means he can do anything that power can do. God's power is linked to all his perfections, including love, holiness, and goodness (Ps 147:5; Isa 40:26; Matt 19:26; Eph 1:18–19).

**OMNIPRESENCE OF GOD:** God's attribute as a spirit of being wholly present everywhere at once. He is transcendent over (above and beyond) his creation: "God is enthroned above the circle of the earth" (Isa 40:22), so that "even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain" him (1 Kgs 8:27). He is also immanent (present) in his creation, though not a part of it: "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Scripture speaks of God as both transcendent and immanent at once (Jer 23:23–24). Though omnipresent, God manifests his presence in a special way at specific times and places, as in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple (Exod 40:34–35; 1 Kgs 8:10–11). God is especially present with his people: "he gathers the lambs in his arms" (Isa 40:11; cf. Ps 139:7–9). In the New Testament, God becomes incarnate in Jesus (John 1:14), and God manifests his special presence now indwelling believers, individually (1 Cor 6:19) and corporately (3:16). He will be especially present with his people forever on the new earth (Rev 21:3).

**OMNISCIENCE OF GOD:** God's attribute of being unlimited in knowledge. Because his understanding is infinite, he knows the past, present, and future. There are hidden things that belong to God alone, yet he reveals some of them so that we may know and obey him (Deut 29:29; Ps 147:5; Rom 11:33–34; Heb 4:13).

**PANENTHEISM:** the view that God is in everything that exists. It understands God as affected by every event in the universe and thus growing in knowledge. Although panentheism sees a distinction between God and the world, it also sees both God and the world as a necessary whole. It differs from pantheism, which says God is all, and all is God. It also differs from biblical Christianity, which says God created all and cares for and directs his creation while maintaining a distinction between the Creator and his creatures.

**PANTHEISM:** the view that God is everything, and everything is God. Pantheism thus erroneously confuses God with his world. The doctrine of creation refutes pantheism, for God alone existed before he made the world, and when he made it, it was and continues to be distinct from him.



**PATIENCE OF GOD:** God's slowness to anger and his willingness to not always punish sin right away. God showed great patience with wicked people when he waited for Noah to build the ark and when he sent prophets to his people, who did not listen. God's patience relates to salvation, for he patiently endures rejecters of the gospel while he rescues believers. He wants us to be patient as we await Christ's return (Exod 34:6–7; Neh 9:30; Jas 1:19; 2 Pet 3:15).

**PERSONALITY OF GOD:** God's being as a divine person, not an impersonal force. Human beings are persons because he has made us in his image. God has the qualities of personality, including intelligence, self-awareness, and the ability to relate to others. He has intelligence, for he is all-knowing. God has self-awareness, for he has a name and invites us to pray to him. He relates to others, for he loves his people deeply (Exod 3:14; Col 4:2; 1 John 3:20; 4:9–11).

**PROVIDENCE:** God's ongoing work of maintaining and guiding his creation. Includes both preservation and government. Preservation is God's work of maintaining his creation, whereas government is his work of directing his creation toward his goals. God's preservation especially pertains to his people, whom he saves and keeps (Psalm 23; 33:10–22; 104:10–30; Isa 40:22–26; Acts 4:23–31; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3).

**RIGHTEOUSNESS (JUSTICE) OF GOD:** God's moral order, by which he governs the world and treats all creatures justly. He cares for the poor and downtrodden. God is a just Judge, and, amazingly, his righteousness also brings salvation. God in wrath, an extension of his justice, hates sin. However, his relentless grace deals with his own wrath toward sinners to rescue them. Jesus saves us from God's wrath by dying as a propitiation to bear that wrath for us. In the future God will defeat evil, Satan, and all his foes. He and his people will win, the lost will suffer forever in hell, and God's justice will prevail (Ps 145:17; Acts 17:31; Rom 3:25; Jas 1:27; Rev 14:9–11).

**SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD:** God's supreme authority and rule over all. He plans and guides all things to his goals. God governs nature and the history of nations and ordains our lives. His sovereign plan is never foiled. God is sovereign and humans are responsible, though putting these truths together is be-

yond our understanding, God's reign means that ultimately he wins, evil loses, and justice prevails (Ps 33:10–11; 103:19; 139:16; 1 Tim 6:15).

**SPIRITUALITY OF GOD:** God as a spiritual Being, without a human body. Although the Bible speaks of God's eyes, ears, and hands, he does not have bodily members. Rather, such expressions are anthropomorphisms that speak of God as if he were a human being. When Scripture speaks of God as having a physical presence, it means that he, an invisible Spirit, reveals himself physically (Deut 4:15–19; Isa 6:1–4; John 1:18; 4:24; 1 Tim 1:17; 1 John 4:11–12).

**TRINITY:** almighty God's eternal existence in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is the First Person of the Trinity, the Son the Second Person, and the Spirit the Third Person. These three persons are one God and are inseparable, sharing the same essence. We distinguish the persons from one another but do not confuse them. We thus hold that only the Son of God became a man and died for our sins. Each person is fully God, and mysteriously, the three divine persons indwell one another (this is called *perichoresis*). Although in unity they share all of their works, they perform specific tasks. To cite an example, Scripture attributes the source of redemption to the Father (in election), its accomplishment to the Son (in his death and resurrection), and its application to the Spirit (in regeneration and conversion). Biblical underpinning for the Trinity includes Deut 6:4; Matt 3:16–17; John 14:10–11; 2 Cor 13:13; 1 Tim 2:5; and 1 Pet 1:1–2. Heresies that rejected the Trinity included Modalistic and Dynamic Monarchianism, both of which emphasized the unity of God. Modalistic Monarchianism (modalism or Sabellianism) held that the three persons were divine successively, not simultaneously. The one God revealed himself first as Father, then as Son, and finally as Holy Spirit. Dynamic Monarchianism (or adoptionism) denied the deity of the Son, holding instead that God "adopted" him at his baptism.

**TRUTHFULNESS OF GOD:** God's identity as the only true God and as one who always speaks the truth. Both Testaments affirm that there is only one living and true God. The true God always speaks the truth and never lies. Therefore, he and his Word are true and trustworthy (1 Sam 15:29; Jer 10:10; John 17:17; Titus 1:2).

**UNITY OF GOD:** the attribute of God as one. Scripture teaches mono-

ism, that there is only one living and true God. God is one and is not composed of parts (this is known as God's simplicity). We distinguish his attributes but do not separate them (Deut 6:4–5; 1 Tim 2:5–6; Jas 2:14–26).

**WISDOM OF GOD:** God's application of his knowledge in order to accomplish his goals. Both Testaments extol him whose great wisdom is unsearchable and unquestionable. God displays his wisdom in all his works, especially creation and redemption. He generously gives wisdom to those who ask in faith (Job 12:13; Rom 11:33; Jas 1:5).