

God is Love: A Father Eternally Loving His Son in the Spirit

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(Edited for readers whose first language is not English)

Introduction

During a recent mission trip to Zambia, I visited Victoria Falls, a thundering, mile-wide torrent of water falling hundreds of feet into the lower Zambesi River. Later that evening, I gazed at the countless stars in the night sky above central Zambia. I saw the “Southern Cross,” a constellation of stars visible only from the southern hemisphere.



Victoria Falls

Thundering waterfalls, countless stars in the night sky, majestic mountains rising above the clouds, vast oceans with their unexplored depths—these wonders of nature create a sense of awe, wonder and mystery. The beauty and design of the world, including the regular, lawful movement of the planets, proclaim the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing “Creator,” “Designer” and “Lawgiver,” who created all things and governs them with infinite power and wisdom.

Nevertheless, nature leaves many important questions about God unanswered. For example, “Why did God create the universe?” “Are we safe in the hands of an all-powerful God?” “Can such a God be trusted?” “What does an all-powerful, all-wise God require of human beings?” “Does such a God love us?” How are we to answer these important questions? How are we to learn what God is like? Where can we turn to learn the meaning and purpose of our lives?

The Son Reveals the Father

Nature cannot answer our most important questions about God. Neither can we “think” our way to God, for the sinful human imagination can only create a “god” in its own image. Although we cannot “think” our way to God nor discover the character of God in nature, God does not leave us in the dark, groping our way toward the light. Rather, God graciously answers our most important questions. He addresses the deepest concerns of our lives.

Athanasius, the great Christian thinker of Egypt (4th Century), knew that nature could not answer our most important questions about God. Athanasius knew that the sinful human mind cannot think its way to God. According to Athanasius, if we want to know God, we must turn to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Athanasius understood that *knowledge of God begins with Jesus!*

Christians rightly believe that Jesus came to save us from our sins (1 Timothy 1:15) and to reconcile us to God (2 Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20). Many Christians, however, do not know that Jesus also came *to reveal the Father!* Only Jesus can show us the true nature and character of God. Only Jesus can answer our questions about God, for *only Jesus knows the Father* (Matt 11:27; John 10:15; 17:25). Jesus knows the Father because *he comes from the Father* (John 7:29). No one has seen the Father but Jesus (John 6:46). Jesus is the eternal “Word,” who was “with God” in the beginning (John 1:1-3). Jesus is the “Word” who became “flesh” (“a human being”) and lived among us as a man (John 1:14). Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” He is the one in whom “the fullness of God dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 1:15; 2:9). The eternal Son of God left his Father’s side in the beauty of heaven (Phil 2:5-8) and became a “man,” born of a woman like everyone else (Galatians 4:4). As a human being like us, Jesus used ordinary human language, ideas and images to teach a confused world that God is “Father!”



Saint Athanasius
“Knowledge of God
begins with Jesus!”

Jesus revealed the Father’s good purpose for the world by doing the Father’s will (John 5:19, 20; 6:38). Jesus did only what the Father wanted him to do. There is a perfect harmony of will, purpose and intention between the Father and the Son. Jesus said, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him [the Father] who sent me” (John 6:38). Jesus says that he “can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. *For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does*” (John 5:19, 20a).

In Jesus, we learn that God is not an uncaring, unloving Creator-Lawmaker; rather, Jesus shows us that God is our loving Father. Jesus reveals the Father’s love for humanity in his gentle hand of mercy upon the leper and the demon-possessed; his healing touch upon the sick, the blind and the lame; his compassion for the poor, the orphan and the widow, and his fellowship with sinners and outcasts. In these acts of love, mercy and kindness, Jesus reveals the Father’s heart. In the much-loved “Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus teaches us that the Father loves us despite our sinfulness, selfishness and ingratitude. In short, Jesus teaches us that “God is love” (see 1 John 4:8, 16; also John 3:16; Rom 5:8; 1 John 3:1).

The Father's Love for the Son

"Nature" shows us that God is "Creator" and "Lawgiver," but Jesus shows us that God is "Father." God has *not* always been "Creator" and "Lawgiver." Rather, God *became* Creator

Before the creation of the world, God is "Father."

There has *never* been a time when the Father was without his beloved Son.

God is eternally a Father loving his Son!

when he made the universe; he *became* Lawgiver when he filled his creation with lawful order and design and began to govern it by his awesome power. While God has not always been Creator and Lawgiver, God has *always* been "Father." In Jesus, we learn that God is *eternally a Father loving his Son*, for the Father loved his Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24).

Like the sun that is never without its light, the Father is never without his Son, for the Son is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:1-3). Athanasius and other early Church leaders rightly understood that if the Father and Son were separated, or if there was a time when the Son did not exist, then there was a time when God was not "Father"—

and if God is not eternally "Father," then God is not eternally "love." In that case, the frightening reality for humanity is that God may cease to love! The idea of a God who is "all-powerful" and "all-knowing" but not "all-loving" is frightening.

The Son's Love for the Father

God is not only the Father who eternally loves his Son; God is also the Son who eternally loves his Father. From before the beginning of time, the Father and Son share a *relationship*



Jesus obeyed his Father's will!

of supreme intimacy and closeness (see John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:2). Jesus calls the Father "Abba," a term of special intimacy used by little children (Mark 14:36). Because Jesus and the Father are so closely and intimately related in the bond of love, Jesus can say to Thomas, "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also." Jesus can even say to Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:7, 9). The relationship between the Father and the Son is one of mutual giving and receiving. The Father and Son "indwell" one another in a fellowship of love. Therefore, Jesus can say, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:10, 11).

Shared Love for the Spirit



**The Holy Spirit is fully God.
The Holy Spirit is the "bond of love"
between the Father and Son.**

Many centuries ago, Christian thinker Richard of St. Victor spent much time thinking about God. Since God is "love" (1 John 4:8, 16), Richard thought, God must be *more than one person*—for love requires *another*. Love requires one to give it and another to receive it. Therefore, Richard understood that God is a Father loving his Son and a Son loving his Father.

Richard went farther in his thinking, however. Richard understood that the Father and Son delight in *sharing* their love, for love always flows out to another. We can easily see how mutual love between a husband and wife flows out to include their child. The married couple's mutual love is strengthened and enriched by their *shared* love for the child. In a similar way, thought Richard, the mutual love between the Father and Son becomes richer and deeper when shared with the Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱ

Richard of St. Victor gives us a theological explanation of the New Testament teaching that "God" is *three* divine persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The mutual love between the Father and Son flows out to include the Holy Spirit. The mutual love between Father and Son is enriched and deepened by their shared love for the Holy Spirit. Richard helps us to understand the New Testament teaching that "God is love." "God" is Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three divine persons, who are united as "one God" in an eternal fellowship of love.

Creation: Rooted in the Father's Love



**The Father's love
for the Son is the "key"
to unlock the mystery of
our lives.**

The Father eternally loves the Son. Unlike a miser with his money, the Father does not hoard his love, but delights to give it to his Son. Because the Father delights to share his life and love, his love overflows into creation, so that his Son Jesus may be the "firstborn" among many sons and daughters. The Father's love for the Son is the key to unlock the mystery of our lives.

The New Testament shows that the creation of the world is rooted in the Father's outgoing love for his Son. According to Paul, Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15; *also* Ephesians 1:3-5). For Paul, there is a connection between Jesus as the "image" of God and Jesus as the "firstborn over all creation." As the "image" of

God, Jesus reveals what the Father is like. Jesus is the “the exact representation of the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3). By reflecting and radiating the Father’s love, Jesus shows that the Father’s love is *outgoing*; that is, God’s love eternally moves toward *another*. Therefore, it is not surprising that the God of “love” created the world. Our creation in the “image of God” (Gen 1:26, 27), and our destiny to be made in the “image of Jesus Christ” (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18), is the continuing, outgoing flow of the Father’s love for the Son, so that Jesus may be the “firstborn over all creation.”

God is a sharing God. God created humanity in order to share with us the love, joy and delight of the Holy Trinity. Creation has its origin in the Father’s love for the Son. In perfect freedom, the Father chooses to share his love for the Son with humanity. The creation of the world—including the creation of human beings—is rooted in the Father’s eternal love for his Son. Creation is the Father’s gift to the Son. The Father sent his Son to be our Saviour, so that we too may share in the Father’s love for the Son (see John 17:26), and Jesus may be firstborn over all creation.

Just as the Father loves the Son, the Son also loves the Father. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, does only his Father’s will. The Son of God does nothing by himself; he does only what he sees his Father doing (see John 5:19, 20; 6:38). Jesus’ perfect faith and obedience is the “image” of his eternal love for the Father in the Spirit (see Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). Jesus desires that “. . . the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (John 14:31). Jesus’ love for the Father is the “model” or “pattern” for our relationship with God.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, Jesus commands us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37, 38).

**The Father’s love for the Son
is the model or pattern for
creation.**

**The Son’s love for the Father
is the model or pattern for
our response to God.**

Jesus is also the “goal” (Greek, *telos*) of creation. Jesus is the “beginning” and the “end,” the “first” and the “last,” the *Alpha* and the *Omega* (see Revelation 22:13). In Jesus, we see humanity as it was created be. He is the “True Man,” who offers to the Father perfect worship, faith and obedience, as God’s intends for all creation. As our High Priest and Representative, Jesus stands in our place, offering the perfect sacrifice of faith and obedience on behalf of all humanity, so that *all* included in his relationship with the Father.

Children of God

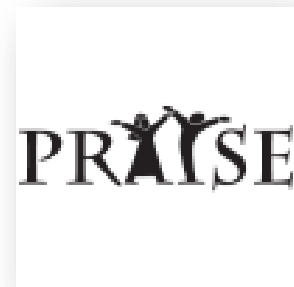
Creation is the Father’s gift to the Son, for the Son is “heir of all things” (Hebrews 1:2). Because the Father is a fountain of overflowing love, he shares his gift to the Son with us!



**Creation is the Father's gift to the Son.
We are "co-heirs" with Christ.**

Creation is the physical, tangible expression of the Father's love for the Son—an overflowing love that *includes* us! We are "co-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17), so that *all that is his is also ours!* When our thoughts about God begin with the eternal Son, Jesus Christ, we know that God is first and foremost our loving "Father." Jesus reveals that creation is an expression of the Father's heart. The Father delights to share his love for the Son with us.

Because Jesus reveals the Father, we know that we are beloved children of God; we are created to live in a joyful *relationship* with our Father. Because Jesus reveals the Father, we know that we may enjoy a "family" relationship of love—the love of a Father for his *children* (see John 3:16, Rom 5:8, 1 John 3:1; 4:9, 10). Because Jesus reveals the Father, we know that we are "co-heirs" with Christ (Rom 8:17), so that all that belongs to Jesus also belongs to us.



**We are our Father's
beloved children!**

See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!—1 John 3:1

Summary

Nature reveals that God is "all-powerful" and "all-wise." Jesus reveals that God is "Father." Our thoughts about God must begin with Jesus, for only the Son of God knows the Father. From all eternity, God is a Father loving his Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Creation is the Father's gift to the Son. We are co-heirs with Christ. The Father includes us in his gift to the Son. All that the Father has is ours in Jesus.

Points to remember:

- Jesus shows that God is our Father.
 - Only Jesus knows the Father.
 - He came to reveal the Father's love for all.
- God is eternally a Father loving his Son.
 - The Father has never been without his Son.
 - Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

- The Father and Son share their love with the Spirit.
 - God is love.
 - God is three persons—Father, Son and Spirit—eternally united in a fellowship of love.
- Creation is the Father’s gift to the Son.
 - The Father includes us in his love for the Son.
 - We are children of God and co-heirs with Christ.

Note to reader: If you have questions about this article, or any article on our website (www.AsiAfricaMinistries.org), please email us at office@AsiAfricaMinistries.org.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Athanasius famously said, “It is better to know God from the Son and call him ‘Father’ than to know God from nature and call him ‘Creator.’” Athanasius understood that only Jesus, the Son of God, can reveal that God is our loving “Father.”

ⁱⁱ We must be careful when we compare human experience and the inner, divine relations of the Holy Trinity. We must not think that the Father and Son “birth” the Holy Spirit as a husband and wife join together to “birth” a child. Rather, it is theologically proper to say that the Son is eternally “begotten” of the Father and the Spirit eternally “proceeds” from the Father and the Son. In saying that the Son is “begotten,” while the Spirit “proceeds,” theologians of the early Church guarded against the false teaching that God has “two sons.”

ⁱⁱⁱ For the excellent insights in this section, I am indebted to Michael Reeves, (2012). *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*, pp. 41-4. This book is a fine introduction to the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity.