

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 2

God (Part 1)

“Pulmonary alveolar macrophages.”

That is what the expert doctor told us. We were knee deep in an asbestos trial and our chore the next day was to explain to the jury how the human body reacts to asbestos in the lungs to produce a scarring disease called asbestosis. When I asked the doctor what was going on in the human body that produced this dreaded condition, the doctor's answer did not help much.

I did not know what a “pulmonary alveolar macrophage” was, nor did I understand how it worked in the disease process. Eventually, the doctor was able to explain the process to me such that I had at least a rudimentary understanding. Of course, my chore was to translate what I had learned into something we could teach the jury.

After much troubleshooting and discussion, we opted for an illustration that we thought might work. We took the microscopically small pulmonary alveolar macrophage and humanized it. We turned it into a person. We called her, Pam! (Okay, we readily agree that “Pam” was appropriate because it was the first letter in each word of pulmonary alveolar macrophage!)

We explained that our bodies produce a number of these Pam's that respond to foreign invaders in the bodies. As we humanized the process, we explained that Pam carries a purse, if you will, a purse loaded with toxic chemicals. When Pam finds a foreign invader in your body, Pam reaches in her purse and throws some various toxins at the invader in an effort to destroy it. If the invader is asbestos, then none of Pam's chemicals are going to work, and ultimately, Pam impales herself on the asbestos fiber, causing all her chemical toxins to leak out of her purse. What this does is cause a scar to grow around the asbestos fiber.

More Pam cells then come to the invasion scene, and over years and years, the process repeats itself countless times until the scarring has grown large enough to seriously debilitate someone.

Now, is this precisely how the pulmonary alveolar macrophage works? Of course not! Macrophages would never be caught with a purse! But, by giving the microscopic substance human characteristics, we (both lawyer and jury) were better able to grasp what the macrophage was and what it did in the body. If we were to give a technical name to what we did, we would say we

“anthropomorphized” the macrophage!¹ The fact that we gave the macrophage human characteristics did not turn the macrophage into a true human. It simply gave us a reference point to better understand it.

This story comes to my mind as we prepare this first lesson on God. God – “The Supreme Being, Pure Act, First Cause of all, provident conservator and governor of the universe; the Absolute – infinite, eternal, immutable, intelligent, omniscient, all-powerful, and free; the Creator, to whom creatures owe homage, respect, and obedience; the Sovereign Good, diffusive of all goodness, toward which everything tends as to its ultimate final cause; the supernatural source of revelation; the Godhead composed of three Divine Persons in one divine nature – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”² How do we understand God? How do we understand Paul’s teaching and concepts of God? It is much more complicated than pulmonary alveolar macrophages! Yet in the Pam story, we might have a glimpse into some Biblical insight on God!

With this in mind, let us begin our consideration of Paul’s theology of God.

PAUL ON GOD

As we go through Paul’s theology, we will find a number of issues and areas where Paul elaborates a great deal. There are concepts Paul worked to teach and where we can carefully read his discourses for insight, but this is not necessarily so with the subject of “God.” Paul never wrote to people who were without faith in God. His letters were to Jews and Greeks, but even the Greeks had an understanding of God as revealed in the Old Testament scriptures.³ Because Paul’s letters were written to believers, we do not have passages where Paul writes with the purpose of teaching on “God.” We do have a passage in Acts 17, however, where Paul was speaking to pagan Greek philosophers. That passage we will consider in some detail later in this lesson.

¹ We might recall from last week’s lesson that the Greek word for man is “*anthropos*.” This week, we could add another Greek word, *morphe*, which means “form.” To “anthropomorphize” is to take something non-human and give it human form, traits, or characteristics. For example, when we attribute human characteristics to an animal or fish, we “anthropomorphize” the animal. The Greek Aesop made great use of this by taking animals and using them in stories to illustrate simple moral lessons (“Aesop’s Fables”).

² New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2d Edition (Thompson Gale 2003) v. 6 at 270.

³ We recall from our lessons on Paul’s life that his Greek converts were generally those Greeks who were already attending services at the Jewish synagogues. We do have Paul speaking to pagans in Athens, but our knowledge of his teaching there is limited to the small portion Luke inserted into his Acts history. We will consider what Paul said there in due time.

Paul's limited discourse upon the subject of God does not leave us without the means of studying Paul's theology on God. Paul references God over 500 times in his writings. As such, we have plenty of material from which we can study and seek insight in this area.

We expect to take several lessons to explore Paul's theology of God. This first lesson considers how Paul "anthropomorphizes" God. At times, Paul clearly had human images and roles in mind in his teaching and writing about God, yet he never did so to the extent that we read in the Old Testament. In certain places in the Old Testament, God is written of with human features,⁴ but Paul does not do that. The Old Testament will often try to explain the actions and thoughts of God by using human traits and words, even though it is clear that the words have limitations that God does not have.⁵ The second part of this lesson will consider some of Paul's similar references to God.

GOD CREATED MAN, NOT VICE VERSA!

As we approach this subject, we do well to remember that Paul was first and foremost a scholastic and devout Jew. As a Pharisee who studied under the famed Rabbi Gamaliel, Paul was acutely aware of God as revealed in the Old Testament. Paul knew the God of Israel, the God revealed in the Old Testament, was the true God. In Romans 3:2, Paul wrote of the Old Testament as the "oracles of God."⁶ These words were God's revelation of himself. We are rightly served if we begin our discussion of Paul's writings by understanding the terms and concepts he carried forth from his upbringing.⁷

⁴ We find this especially in the poetic Old Testament writings. We frequently read of the "hand of God" (Ps 139:10, etc.), the eyes of God (Ps 139:16, Am 9:4, etc.), the mouth of God (Jer 9:12, etc.), the ears of God (Ps 140:6, Ez 8:18, etc.), and the heart of God (Gen 6:6, etc.).

⁵ Consider, for example, the account of Noah and the flood. Genesis 8:1 states, "But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark." Are we to assume from this usage of "remembered" that God had previously "forgotten" Noah? Of course not! This passage uses a human term to convey the idea that God took an action based on his knowledge and commitment from the past. Similarly, the Old Testament frequently speaks of God as a "jealous" God (Ex 20:5; Dt 4:24; Zec 8:2, etc.).

⁶ In Romans 4:17, Paul references God as the one in whom Abraham "believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."

⁷ We do well to remember that Paul always considered the Old Testament an appropriate and important place of study and theology. As Paul told Timothy near the end of Paul's life, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Of note here is another anthropomorphism, "*breathed*."

Paul was well aware of the Genesis story. Paul knew that, “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gen 1:26). Paul knew the result, “So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Paul also knew, no doubt, that the struggle of history was mankind’s reversal of the Genesis account. While Genesis gives us the truth that God made man in his image, man has spent history trying to make God into an image of man (or some other created being)! In spite of the second of the Ten Commandments, (“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything” (Ex. 20:4).), Paul wrote of man’s consistent error:

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Rom 1:23-25).

Paul never considered God as man. In fact, Paul would write that humanity should perceive the difference simply by looking around! Paul wrote:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made (Rom 1:19-20).

To remake God in the likeness of man was not simply an issue of idolatry. To think that God is human in nature or disposition is abhorrent. Human thought alone does not perceive the reality of God and his thoughts. “No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:11). It is only through God’s Spirit that humanity begins to access understanding of God and his ways. It is the Spirit that “searches the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10). Paul explains that it is this same Spirit that imparts to us understanding of God.⁸

In this sense, we see Paul explaining God as far beyond humanity, even though God made humans in his image. Paul understood that while God has revealed himself through scripture, God remains beyond man’s power to fully grasp or perceive. This is why Paul can lapse into praise in 1 Timothy 6:15-16 writing of God as:

The blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

⁸ See the rest of 1 Corinthians 2, especially verses 12-16.

So we see, straight from Paul's pen that it is outrageous to suggest that God is in any measure human. Isaiah prophesied centuries before Paul God's proclamation that:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Is 55:8-9).

The same God inspired Paul to write similarly:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Rom 11:33).

In this way, Paul differs from many we might encounter in our daily life. Ask people to describe God, and you will see that often people describe the God they believe should exist. They will describe what fits their reasoning of what a superior being should be, often without regard to what scripture says on the issue.

On the day I am typing this lesson, I had a discussion walking down 6th Avenue in New York City with another lawyer on this subject. My friend told me that his idea of God was of a loving being that looks at people without regard to the religious affiliation of the people. When I asked if he meant that God was looking into our hearts rather than the name of the church on our door, he said, "Oh yes, but also so much more." He continued, "God is not wrapped up in whether we are Buddhist or Christian. He is bigger than that." Now my question for my friend, and my question for us, is whether we live having made God in our minds as what we think he should be? Or, have we decided to read from his word to determine his nature by how he chose to reveal it to us?

We see Paul confronting those in his day who lived with gods manufactured from what humans thought God should be like as opposed to the reality of God. Consider where Paul spoke of God to the Athenians with no history in Old Testament scriptures and no Jewish understanding of God as self-revealed. In Acts 17:24-29 Paul told the gathered philosophers:

The God, who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served⁹ by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he

⁹ The Greek for "served" is *therapeuetai* (θεραπεύεται). It means to "heal, cure, or serve". Paul is referencing the need with traditional Greek gods to fix, for example, a nose that might get chipped off. Unlike the Greek gods who need humans to fix them, the true God needs no such help!

himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, **we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.** The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

While Paul never wrote or taught that God is what we humans make him out to be. Paul still uses human terms to help us understand God and his actions. We consider now some examples of passages where Paul uses human traits and vocabulary in ways that reflect and teach about God.

PAUL “ANTHROPOMORPHIZES” GOD

With a solid foundation of “biblical theology,”¹⁰ we now turn to a number of passages where Paul uses human ideas to express to us truths about God. The Biblical theology is important because it shows us that as we consider these passages, we do not do them justice if we believe they teach that God possesses the mind or heart of humans. The truths lie deeper and are worth digging for.

Paul never confused the human descriptions of God, the “anthropomorphisms,” to be a valid reduction of God to a human level. Those expressions were always meant to make God understandable and accessible to humans of all ages and maturities. Paul used human expression of God in a similar manner. Consider, for example, Paul's writings of the “wrath of God.” A sampling is set out below:

- “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18).

¹⁰ See theology lesson 1, available for listening or reading at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. In that lesson, we discussed the three steps of theology as 1 – “Exegesis” (understanding a passage as written and in context); 2 – “Biblical theology” taking various passages on a subject and studying them together; and 3 – “Scholastic theology” where through reasoning and common sense passages are compared and contrasted for insight and conclusions consistent with the whole of Scripture.

- “But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed” (Rom 2:5).
- “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom 5:9).
- “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” (Rom 12:19).
- “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph 5:6).
- “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming” (Col 3:5-6).

When we do our exegesis on these passages we learn that Paul uses the Greek term “orge” (*ὀργή*) for “wrath.” The term is also used for “anger” and “revenge.” In fact, in Ephesians 5:21, Paul uses the word telling the Ephesians to “let all wrath and anger be put away from you.” Then several verses later, Paul writes the passage set out earlier, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph 5:6).

Is Paul injecting an emotional state of anger and temper onto God in these passages? Is Paul portraying God as one around whom we best walk on eggshells lest his anger ignite? We would suggest not. Let us suggest that the exercise of reasoning through these passages (what we defined last week as “scholastic theology”) indicates a better explanation of Paul’s meaning and God’s character.

As we discussed earlier, Paul never understood or taught of God as simply a human on a grander scale. While the Greeks and Romans in their myths assigned to their gods human frailties of emotions the reactions of whims and fancies, Paul always set apart God from the gods worshipped by pagans (see 1 Cor 8). Paul did recognize and see God as an unchanging being who was pure and holy in his very essence.

These passages where Paul wrote of God’s “wrath” were not an attempt to zero in on God’s emotional reactions to sin. Instead, these passages conveyed the principle that God has a factual reaction to sin. There is a factual consequence to sin. Just as putting one’s hand into fire will burn the hand, so sinning produces a burn or punishment from God. If we speak of the fire’s wrath upon the flesh that is placed into it, the “wrath” is an anthropomorphic expression that conveys the factual reaction of fire on flesh.

This is Paul's manner of conveying the truth that God, not out of a human-esque reaction, but out of a holy and pure character, reacts to sin with destruction. Indeed, the lesson of the cross is a lesson that sin leads to death. The sins of the world on Christ were not to appease God because he was angry and needed pacification. God truly lives in purity and holiness and sin has no place in his presence. Sin and sinners are driven from the Garden of Eden and from God's heaven. God cannot compromise or change his character.

As we consider God in Paul's theology, as well as in the entire New Testament, we do not see the level of anthropomorphisms that we read in the Old Testament. Why? No doubt there are a number of reasons. But the one we zero in on is Jesus. In Jesus, we have God in human flesh. We have actual God on earth in a way that reflects God in heaven. As Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). So we have in Jesus, the ultimate picture of God in human terms, in ways we can study as children as well as older in age. So while we speak of God as beyond humanity, as we consider him in the human terms of anthropomorphisms, we reach a question:

SO, ISN'T GOD HUMAN IN CHRIST?

Here is the paradox: God is not human, yet orthodoxy teaches that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. What shall we do with this? First, we recognize the question and will discuss it much more fully in later lessons. For now, we acknowledge that even as orthodoxy acknowledges Jesus as fully human, we are reminded that nowhere has anyone suggested that Jesus was a sinful human. Paul wrote that "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing...being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form..." (Phil 2:5-8).¹¹ But Paul never suggested that Jesus was fallen in his nature as man. Paul emphasized the opposite, "For he made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). Even as we look at Jesus charging the moneychangers with trespassing on God's temple, we see his punishment properly meted out.

We also will note that some of the significance of the incarnation, as Paul taught and as we will see in coming lessons, was the same as the anthropomorphisms of scripture. In Christ, as human and God, we are taught much more of God than we could otherwise understand. We begin to better grasp his love and his nature as we see him in human form, yet without the flaws and sins of the fall.

¹¹ On the rare occasions where Paul used the Greek term "God" (*theos*) for Jesus, he always does so without the specific article "the." When Paul wrote of "the God," he always referenced God the Father. This is God as Jesus proclaimed who "is spirit" (Jn 4:24).

Finally, we note that the concept of the Trinity comes into play. For Jesus is one essence with God the Father, and yet is distinct as well. This comes in later lessons, though!

Next week, we explore Paul's teaching of God as "Father" – both of Jesus and of the church.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. "God created man in his image" (Gen 1:27).

We see in ourselves beings that were made to reflect something of God's character and nature. We were made to fellowship and relate to God. We were made to walk in his holiness. Yet, we sinned and fell from that wonderful state of creation. As part of our fall, we are prone to believe in our efforts at remaking God in our image, rather than seeking to understand him as he is. This must stop! We miss the Creator by substituting the created. We need to take the time and prayerful thought to learn of God as he has revealed himself, not as we wish to define him.

Just as we must be careful not to remake God in our image using earthly terms, we need also to remember that God wants to be known by us. He has chosen through his word to use stories, human words, and even human form to reveal himself. We can faithfully speak of God holding us in his hand, of his eye never leaving us, of his heart caring for us. We can teach our children these same things. But we need to remember as we do so, that we should carefully understand that God is not a man!

2. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

Yes, God is not one we can know fully, and yet he is one we can know truly. We can read, live, watch, pray, and learn. We can see things that move us to praise as Paul did, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" Still, we miss what Paul was saying if we fail to see that it was Paul's observations of God's mighty works in history past and future that bring forth Paul's praise. In other words, while we cannot ever fully know or understand God, we can still learn of him and see his magnificence in ways that humble us, move us, and bring worship from our lips. When we sing songs of worship to our God, we are not merely going through a "church service." We are taking time to reflect and pronounce the greatness of our God.

3. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness” (Rom 1:18).

“God” and “ungodliness” – see how the words are related? God is; and “ungodliness” is that which is not like God, not “godly.” Does it not make sense that God will destroy, or “reveal his wrath” against that which is not in his nature? God is light. In him is no darkness. None. Zero. Light banishes darkness.

Do we wish to be in God? Then, we must find ourselves reborn in purity, our sinful selves dead. The ungodliness in us is not going to spend eternity in the presence of holy God. God’s wrath, his factual punishment, will destroy sin and sinner alike. Here we see the significance of the death of Christ as a substitute for the sinner. By taking the sins of mankind, God’s wrath descends upon the Messiah in his death. We can join in that death and be reborn in a new life. Here, God works to redeem his people.