

LESSON XXV:

A Course Summary of Christian Theology and Ancient Polytheism

So where have we been? We've compared and studied a view of the world and a way of life that flows from believing in one God versus what life looks like worshipping many gods. Specifically, we've compared the God of ancient Israel and the early New Testament with the gods and goddesses of ancient Mesopotamia and Canaan. To be sure, there are other religions that believe in one God, such as Islam, but Allah is not the God of the Bible.

It is not just a belief in "one God" that shapes our view of life; it is that one God's quality, character and purposes that shape what we believe about ourselves, what character we strive for and the purposes for which we live. How we answer the question, "who is God and what is He like" is the fount from which all other worthy questions of life must flow. He is the starting point of our existence, our meaning, our place within the universe. Without an anchor firmly grounded in a proper knowledge of God, we are adrift in the world. Thus through this study we've sought to know God better, not only in contrast to other gods, but more importantly through His unfolding biblical narrative and through the Bible's central themes that point to the Son of God. Hopefully, you have discovered that the Bible is both an invitation to "taste and see that the Lord is good" and a call to share in His goodness.

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Let's review God's story as we compared it with the polytheistic stories: Our study centered around God's interaction with Israel in comparison with the gods of her neighbors. Whereas the ancient Sumerians believed that they were created as slaves for their needy greedy nature gods, ancient Israel believed that she was fashioned by the transcendent, benevolent Creator of all. God made Israel's first parents, Adam and Eve, and placed them in a garden where He provided everything needed for life in Him. Adam and Eve were entrusted with a high calling – to reflect their Triune Maker and take care of His creation. Deceived by one who hated both the Maker and His chosen representatives, Adam and Eve chose to become gods unto themselves. Death soon followed, for they were severed from the Life-Giver. But God's plan was not thwarted by their sin. Choosing a representative called Abraham, God promised to make a great nation through him whereby someday all the nations of the world would be blessed. Abraham's descendants, Israel, became a nation in Egypt, yet she was a nation of slaves. Through His awesome power, God freed Israel from bondage to worship Him in the desert. Like her first parents, Israel was given the

job of being God's representative. But for Israel this meant that she must bring judgment on the peoples of a land who had chosen death through the idolatrous worship of many gods. Unlike her neighbors, whose beliefs fostered immorality, murder, and sorcery, Israel was entrusted with God's Law, which was a reflection of His moral character. In contrast to her neighbors' seven-day week, in which they ceaselessly labored to meet the needs of their gods, Israel was given a sacred Seventh Day and Seventh Year of rest. Through resting, she commemorated God's creative work and expressed dependence on Him for all her needs. When Israel worshipped God and represented Him, she laid claim to her role as steward of the land, while Satan used his lies to beguile her neighbors into surrendering the lordship of the land to Baal. In the end, Israel did not bring judgment on the idolaters of the land. Instead, she became a slave herself, rejecting both God's moral law and her dependence upon Him. After much long-suffering by God, Israel was driven from the land into captivity, where at last through her own suffering Israel learned to be faithful to the love of God. To this remnant, God gave the promise of a New Covenant in which He would write his laws upon tablets of human hearts. Through His Son and His Spirit and through a daughter of Abraham, God enacted his promise to bless the whole world.

Separate from the story of Israel, but included in her canon of scripture, were the stories of Noah and Job. In contrast to Israel's account, the Babylonians told the story of a "Job" whose suffering was meaningless and who sought relief through a sorcerer with the power to appease the gods and drive away the demons. Job's suffering was anything but meaningless. The book opens with Satan's challenge that Job only worshiped God because He provided. God trusted Job and accordingly took away His gifts. When Job continued to faithfully worship Him, God revealed the significance of the role He gives trustworthy yet weak human beings – to thwart the claims of Satan and reclaim territory we had given away in the fall. Job both testified to the worthiness of God's worship and revealed that what the sufferer needs most is not health and prosperity, but a revelation of God's transcendent wisdom and power in the midst of the storm. The help of the Babylonian was a powerful man; the help of the Hebrew was a powerful God.

While the contrast in this story is between two men (the Babylonian and the biblical Job), the contrast between the Jewish and the Sumerian flood stories is between the deities. Sumer's flood story involved cranky gods, who justified the destruction of humanity for their own selfish desire to get a decent night's sleep. Israel's flood story was about a God who gave men free will, knowing they would run amuck. He knew that He would have to destroy almost all of His creation, even

though man's destruction would cause Him great pain. He knew when He saved Noah that the ark would lead to the cross.. But it was worth the price of divine and human suffering for men to share the selfless love of a Triune God – to be able to freely and willingly receive and return that love.

In the stories of the afterlife, we saw the god of death and the goddess of life grasping for more power. Both ended up being violently destroyed, then brought back to life so that the seasons of fertility and barrenness could be maintained. Brothers, sisters and lovers were substitutes sent to Hell by the goddess of life and the god of the dead. In the story of the cross, God is the lover of mankind, who takes on the flesh of His “brothers” so that He can ransom and rescue those held captive by the god of Death. By His willing sacrifice, He triumphs over the grave and swallows up death in Life. His resurrection is the first fruit of His brethren, who have been called out of death and darkness into His glorious light and life. Through the price of His substitutionary death we have been given again the life our first parents traded away for a bite of forbidden fruit.

The stories of Israel, Noah, and Job and of Christ's resurrection reveal an all-powerful, all-good, all-wise God, who loves and provides for his creation. His character is all the more distinct when contrasted to the limited, self-centered, capricious gods and goddesses who made men to slave for their needs.

“He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He gives all men life and breath and everything else.” Acts 17:25

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We have looked at the Bible as we would a great piece of literature that ultimately tells one grand story. What is its plot? Who are the main characters? What's the purpose of the story? What message does the author convey through its major themes? What's its central conflict? How is it resolved? The Bible tells the story of one main character, the protagonist – God. The supporting cast includes the antagonist – Satan, and man, who must choose a side. The community of people, through which God tells His story, changes throughout the narrative while man's God-given role stays the same. The community, which is the expression of man's special creation, begins by focusing on the husband and wife, then on the nation Israel, and then on the Body of Christ. However, the purpose for all three modes of relating to God remains the same: mankind is to

represent God in the flesh. Satan hates God and man. As Satan is God's antithesis, his darkness, ugliness and deceit stand in stark contrast to the light, beauty and truth of God. Satan is man's antagonist, who tempts him away from his creator and actually necessitates the greatest actions of the Hero – as Savior. In the story's plot, free-willed man is created both to share in the love of God and to represent Him upon the face of the earth. Worship, sacrifice and suffering all play major parts of His story and His process to make us like Himself. Worship is the scripture's central conflict, but it is not its central purpose. The central purpose is to provide a revelation of God, for it is through this revelation that we discover the One who is worthy of worship.

This brings us again to the adversary, who delights in stealing worship from God and dominion from man and imprisoning us as his slaves. His primary temptation in the Old Testament was idolatry, but both its ancient and modern forms transform people into the objects of their worship and bring about death. Satan's methods are all about power and entrapping men through physical desires and selfishness. Conversely, God uses weak, free-willed human beings and gives them His power through the Holy Spirit to enable victory over our enemy, our flesh and our self-will. Despite our weaknesses and vulnerability, God has made the actions of man central to His plan. He equips us (without obliterating our free wills) to play profound roles as co-laborers with Christ for His eternal glory and our eternal transformation. We have been given a high and noble calling – to share in the very life and love of the Trinity. Out of the overflow of that love, the Triune God provides us with all things. It is the "God who Provides" who is worthy of all our worship, honor and praise.

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Throughout this course we examined four themes from the Bible that we tracked through the Old Testament and into the New – all are brought together in Christ. Moses' refrain to "Choose Life or Choose Death" is ultimately a call to choose Christ, who is the only life and light of men. In the theme, "God as Man's Provider", Christ is God's ultimate provision for mankind. In "Man as God's Representative", Christ clothed in human flesh is the ultimate representative of God to man, revealing God and bringing glory unto the Father. In "Suffering", it is again the Lord Jesus Christ, who as the suffering servant accomplished the plan of God upon the cross, making possible through his torturous death and glorious resurrection our very life. While there are other biblical themes that could have been chosen for this book, the reality is that all major

Scriptural themes directly or indirectly point to Jesus Christ. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the Word made flesh. He is the revelation of God in bodily form. "For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." He is the Providing, Suffering, Life-Giving God, who is alone to be worshipped. Glory to Him!

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So we come at last to the invitation: Remember, the Bible was written to people who were surrounded by and at times immersed in gross paganism. Can you imagine how beautiful the God of the Bible must have sounded and how elevated biblical truths must have looked from the pit of paganism? The beauty, goodness, and truth of Israel's God must have astounded a searching polytheist or the repentant Israelite, who had the courage to leave the lies and darkness behind. But there were some things that the polytheists rightly understood. People are called to imitate their gods. The annual festivals of the creation stories and the "dead and rising god" fertility rites were re-enacted each year in painstaking detail. These faithful reenactments, though corrupt and twisted, were central to the polytheist's religion and displayed to everyone around them exactly what they believed about the character and nature of their gods and goddesses. Not to testify to the potent reality of both their creation and spring "resurrection" myths was believed to have dire consequences for the entire community.

Here is where the pagan can challenge the Christian. Do we take seriously the call to imitate our God in His goodness, beauty and truth? Do we think intentionally about what it means to live according to the Bible's creation and resurrection stories? Do we think about the ramifications to our communities of family, church, or neighborhood when we sin and fail to live in the light of the Creation and Resurrection? Do we value others as unique pictures of God? Do we live in light of our God-given purpose to love like Him and spread His image across the earth? Do we sacrifice the desires of our flesh to do the will of the Father? Do we consider others as more important than ourselves? These are just some of the ways in which we can imitate or honor our Creator and Savior and show to the world what He is like. Indeed, we have been given a high and noble calling. You might be thinking, "Yes, but the pagans only did their big imitation thing once a year. Imitating God sounds like something we should be doing every day." Exactly. When you start thinking like this, then you've got it! The Bible is an invitation to come and see the beauty and goodness of the Lord and to be transformed by it.