

# The Centrality of God in New Testament Theology

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We tend to look past what constantly stands in front of us. If we see them every day, we often take for granted verdant trees, stunning sunsets, and powerful waves thundering on the beach. Similarly, in reading the NT we are prone to screen out what the NT says about God himself. God is, so to speak, shoved to the side, and we investigate

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other themes, such as justification, reconciliation, redemptive history, and new creation. I suggest that the centrality of God in Christ is the foundational theme for the narrative unfolded in the NT. We must beware, of course, of abstracting God himself from the story communicated in the NT. Focusing on God does not mean that we engage in systematic theology. Biblical theology does not pursue the philosophical implications of the doctrine of God, for such an enterprise is distinctive of systematic theology. We may think that nothing further needs to be said

about “God” in a theology of the NT because it is obvious and assumed that our theology is about God. But if we ignore what is obvious and assumed, we may overlook one of the most important themes in NT theology. We may gaze past what looms massively in front of us simply because we are accustomed to the scenery.

It should also be said at the outset that the grounding theme of NT theology is magnifying God in Christ. Separating the revelation of God in the NT from Christology, as if God is central and Christ is secondary, is impossible. God is magnified and praised in revealing himself through Christ as God fulfills his saving promises. The coming of Christ does not diminish the centrality of God but rather enhances it.

It might be objected that to speak of the Father, Son, and Spirit is to fall prey to systematic theology and to later Trinitarian theology. However, the argument made here is that an inductive study of the NT itself demonstrates that the Father, Son, and Spirit are foundational and central to NT theology. Moreover, our study of the Father,

Son, and Spirit must be integrated with the fulfillment of God's saving promises—the already/not yet theme in the NT. The Father fulfills his saving promises in history by sending his Son, and the Son's work is vindicated through the sending of the Spirit. In the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit our focus is directed to the God of the promise and to God's saving work in fulfilling the promises.

In the current chapter we will briefly explore what the NT writers tell us about God. What stands out is that God is the sovereign creator of all, who rules over all of creation. God the creator is also the Father of believers and the Lord Jesus Christ. In his mercy and grace he saves human beings. Those who refuse to obey the Lord will face judgment on the last day. As the Lord and redeemer all glory and praise and honor belongs to him.

### THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

One of the pervasive themes in the OT, from the very first verse, is that God is the creator of all that exists. Indeed, God's role as creator is woven into the fabric of nearly every piece of literature. Since God is the creator of all, he is the sovereign Lord, who demands to be worshiped above anything or anyone in the universe (Exod 20:3), for he is the one true and living God. Creatures, by definition, should give primacy to their creator. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 was fundamental to Jewish thought, and the Shema (Deut 6:4) was said daily by Israelites. They were reminded by these words that there is only one God, and that their supreme loyalty should be given to him alone. God is not an impersonal creator, and he has shown his mercy and love to his people by redeeming them from slavery in Egypt. Thompson summarizes well the OT portrayal of God: "God is identified, first, as the Maker and Creator of all that is. God is the life-giving God. Because God is the creator of all, God is also supreme over all other beings, whether heavenly or human. Epithets such as 'Almighty' and 'Most High' indicate God's supremacy over all other figures and underscore the extent of God's sovereignty. As Creator and Sover-

eign, God therefore merits worship and honor."<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah also emphasized repeatedly that Yahweh is the one and only God, and that idols stem from the futile imagination of human beings (e.g., Isa 45:20–21). Yahweh is the true and living God, the first and the last, and the ruler of the kingdoms of the world. Similarly, in the book of Daniel the sovereignty and rule of God over all nations is expressed in a number of texts (Dan 4:34–35). When NT writers refer to God, they refer to the true and living God revealed in the OT, the God who reigns over the nations. God's rule over all things is grounded in the fact that he is the creator of all things, the maker of heaven and earth.

As we consider what the Synoptic Gospels say about God, it is necessary to be selective. What the Synoptics teach about God can be embraced under three major themes: (1) God's sovereignty, (2) God's mercy, and (3) God's glory. The term "heaven" emphasizes God's sovereignty and majesty. He is the one exalted far above human beings. Both "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" refer to the kingdom that belongs to God. There is no need to rehearse again here how pervasive this theme is in the Synoptics. What must be noted, however, is the fact that the kingdom is *God's*. He is the sovereign one who rules over all.

The kingdom of God suggests God's rule and reign over all, but we have also seen that the kingdom of God in the Synoptics refers to the fulfillment of God's saving promises. The coming of the kingdom in Jesus Christ testifies that God is a promise-keeping God, and hence the coming of the kingdom spells the fulfillment of his promise to bless his people. Matthew's opening genealogy conveys that God is a promise-keeper, for Jesus is traced back to David and Abraham (Matt 1:1–17). He fulfills the covenant to bless the whole world made to Abraham (Gen 12:3) and the covenant of an eternal dynasty pledged to David (2 Sam 7; 1 Chron 17). In the same way, the infancy narratives in Luke 1–2 emphasize that God is fulfilling his covenantal promises relating to his kingdom.

God's kingdom calls attention to both his sov-

ereignty and his mercy, but it also communicates the goal for human existence. Human beings are to live for the sake of God's kingdom, and nothing should take precedence over the kingdom (e.g., Matt 6:33). But this means that human beings are to give the whole of their lives over to God. He is the great treasure that is received when the kingdom is found (see Matt 13:44–46). To live for the sake of the kingdom is simply another way of saying that human beings live for God's sake—for his glory.

### **GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY**

The word "sovereignty" designates God's rule and control over the world that he has made. He bestows beauty on the lilies and clothes the grass of the field (Matt 6:28–30). He is the living God (Matt 26:63); nothing is outside the realm of possibility for him, so that he can grant conception to a virgin (Luke 1:37) and give eternal life to human beings (Matt 19:26). Human beings limit God because they do not know his power to raise people from the dead (Matt 22:29). If he wills, he can turn stones into the children of Abraham (Matt 3:9), and he could, if he so desired, deliver Jesus from death even when he was upon the cross (Matt 27:43).

God declares his will authoritatively through his word (e.g., Matt 4:4; 15:6; Luke 3:2; 5:1; 8:11, 21; 11:28). His authority manifests itself in his control over the course of history. He raised up David and installed him as king over Israel (Luke 1:32). Angels are commissioned by God to carry out his will and purposes (e.g., Matt 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; 4:11; Luke 1:19, 26; 2:9–14). Not even a sparrow falls apart from his will, and hence believers can be assured that he watches over and cares for them (Matt 10:29–31). The infancy narratives also relate God's sovereignty, for despite Herod's machinations, Jesus escapes from his clutches (Matt 2). The story echoes the preservation of Moses and Israel during the time of the Pharaohs, impressing upon the reader God's sovereignty in working out his saving plan. God knows the hearts of all people

infallibly (Luke 16:15). He hides the revelation of himself from those who are wise and proud but discloses himself to those who are humble (Matt 1:25–26).

### **GOD'S MERCY**

The Father rules over all things, but his reign over all reflects his love and mercy. The birds find their daily sustenance from his hand (Matt 6:26), and he adorns flowers with their spectacular and quiet beauty (Matt 6:28–29). God's love cannot be limited to the people of God; he demonstrates his love to unbelievers in sending sunlight and rain to all (Matt 5:45). He knows what people need even before they voice their requests in prayer, and hence frantic and superstitious repetitions should be avoided (Matt 6:7–8; Luke 12:30). We see from these texts that God's sovereignty expresses his love. God's sovereignty does not signify the harsh rule of a tyrannical and mean-spirited despot. He gives good things to those who make requests of him (Matt 7:11), or as Luke says, he grants the Holy Spirit to those who entreat him (Luke 11:13). God should not be compared to a malicious father who smuggles a serpent that looks like a fish into his child's lunch (Luke 11:11). He does not substitute a scorpion that is rolled up so that it appears to be an egg (Luke 11:12). His heart is generous and giving, and he is not a crabbed and stingy father. He is good (Mark 10:18), forgiving the sins of those who come to him in repentance (Mark 2:7). God's beneficence is captured well in Luke 12:32: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." The Father's tender care for his weak and needy people is represented by his giving them the kingdom. He does not give the kingdom reluctantly or grudgingly but joyfully bestows it on his people.

The love of God is remarkably displayed in the parables of Luke 15. The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons all represent God's overflowing joy when sinners repent and turn to him. All three parables are designed to defend before the Pharisees and scribes Jesus' table fellowship with social

outcasts and sinners (Luke 15:1–2). The unforgettable story of the two lost sons communicates this truth powerfully. The father in the parable does not bear a grudge against his returning younger son by recalling how he wasted his inheritance. In Palestinian culture running was considered undignified, but the father does not care about decorum. Filled with compassion, he runs to greet his son and embraces him with kisses. And the father does not allow the son to finish his confession (cf. Luke 15:18–19 with 15:21). He celebrates his son’s return by outfitting him with the best robe and with shoes and a ring, and by preparing a fattened calf for a celebratory feast. The younger son represents tax collectors and sinners who have wasted their lives by abandoning the ways of God (Luke 15:1–2). The older son, who supposedly was compliant and obedient (“I never disobeyed your command” [Luke 15:29]), represents the Pharisees and scribes. He returns from a hard day’s work and is scandalized to discover that a party is being thrown to celebrate the return of his brother who is a scoundrel. The father, however, is unrelenting in his love. He pleads with the older brother to join the festivities. Jesus here communicates God’s love for Pharisees, and the parable ends with this question reverberating in the ears of the readers: Will the Pharisees come to the party? Indeed, will the reader?

The love of God cannot be understood apart from the holiness and the judgment of God. Those who refuse to submit to his lordship will face judgment on the last day (Matt 7:1–2; 10:15; 11:20–24; Luke 10:13–15). Trees that fail to bear good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire (Matt 7:19; cf. Luke 3:9). Those who do not have faith will be cast out into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12; cf. Luke 13:25–30). Weeping and gnashing of teeth will also be the lot of those without a wedding garment, those who are not dressed to enter the Messianic banquet (Matt 22:11–14). Human beings should fear God, who is able to cast them into hell (Matt 10:28). If people do not

repent, they will perish (Luke 13:1–9). The failure to conquer sin will result in unquenchable fire on the last day (Mark 9:42–48), and those who refuse to forgive others will not receive forgiveness from God (Matt 6:14–15; 18:21–35). God will punish the tenants in the vineyard who do not bear fruit (Matt 21:40–41). The rich who fail to care for the poor and do not repent will suffer forever (Luke 16:19–31). God’s mercy, then, can be understood only against the background of his righteous anger against sin and the judgment to come. The day of mercy has arrived in the preaching of the kingdom, and a hand beckoning sinners to repent is extended. In the gospel of Jesus Christ and the preaching of God’s kingdom the “tender mercy” of God has dawned (Luke 1:78–79).

### **GOD’S GLORY**

Since God is the creator and the sovereign of all, he demands primacy in the lives of all people. In speaking of God’s glory, the intention is not to restrict the theme to the places where the word “glory” appears. The word “glory” is used broadly to capture the supremacy of God in everything. In other words, human beings exist to obey, believe in, and praise God. For instance, Jesus did not fall prey to sentimentality with respect to his family; he maintained that those who do God’s will constitute his family (Matt 12:50). God exercises an absolute claim upon the lives of all. Thus the most important thing in life is that God’s name be honored and hallowed (Matt 6:9). In the Matthean version of the Lord’s Prayer, hallowing God’s name is carried out when his kingdom comes and when his will is done (Matt 6:10). Jesus rejected Satan’s invitation to leap from the pinnacle of the temple because such an act would constitute a testing of God (Matt 4:7; cf. Deut 6:16). Jesus drew upon Deuteronomy 6 again when Satan tried to entice Jesus to worship him. Jesus replied that he must worship and serve God alone (Matt 4:8–10; cf. Deut 6:13). It seems clear that sin is heinous because it constitutes a dishonoring of God and a refusal to trust in him.

God's primacy over everything animates Jesus' teaching. Money lurks as a great danger because it easily becomes one's god. Those entranced with treasures on earth lose out on the treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19–21). The parable of the rich fool illustrates the danger of earthly riches (Luke 12:16–21). The rich man is not faulted for the capital investment of building bigger barns, as if planning how to increase the profitability of one's business were blameworthy. Rather, Jesus identifies the rich man's fundamental sin as his failure to be "rich toward God" (Luke 12:21). The rich man neglected to think about God at all, so that he conceived of his life as a perpetual vacation where he could relax and enjoy his wealth. Jesus taught that God allows no competitors. Human beings cannot serve two masters (Matt 6:24), and so the kingdom of God must have first claim upon their lives (Matt 6:33). The final reward that human beings will receive cannot be equated with earthly blessings, as if heaven were merely a supercharged version of the pleasures of this world. The greatest joy, reserved for the pure in heart, is seeing God himself (Matt 5:8). No joy can be compared to the vision of God promised to the faithful.

God's absolute priority is expressed by Jesus' reply to the rich young ruler (Matt 19:17; Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). In all three accounts Jesus declared that only God is good, calling attention to the beauty of God's moral perfection. Since God is supreme, it follows that loving God with all of one's being and strength is elevated as the most important command in the Scriptures (Matt 22:37–40; Mark 12:28–34; cf. Luke 10:25–27). This command, of course, finds its roots in the Shema (Deut 6:4). The religious tradition practiced by the Pharisees irritated Jesus because it substituted rituals for heart devotion and elevated human traditions above God's word (Matt 15:1–11). Jesus was not satisfied with lips that mouth the correct words if the hearts of human beings stray far from God. He demanded authenticity and affection in the worship of God.

The supremacy of God over all things means

that nothing is more important than glorifying God. Good works are commended not merely because they help others—though that too is important—but also because they bring glory to God (Matt 5:13–16). When the ten lepers were cleansed, the Samaritan stood out because he praised and thanked God for his healing (Luke 17:11–19). The Samaritan, who stood outside mainstream Judaism, recognized that God deserves praise for his mercy. The nine who did not give thanks stood condemned because they failed to do what is most important in life. When Jesus raised the only son of the widow of Nain from the dead, people were amazed and glorified God (Luke 7:16). The woman disfigured by a disablement for eighteen years glorified God when Jesus healed her (Luke 13:13). Jesus' healings often and rightly stimulated people to give praise and glory to God (Matt 15:29–31).

The Gospel of Luke begins and ends with praise of God. Mary and Zechariah magnified and blessed the Lord for fulfilling his covenantal promises (Luke 1:46–55, 68–79). The angels praised God and gave him glory at the birth of the Christ (Luke 2:13–14). And the shepherds blessed God because the Christ was revealed to them (Luke 2:20). Simeon and Anna also responded with praise and thanksgiving (Luke 2:28, 38). Luke's Gospel concludes with the disciples in the temple praising and blessing God (Luke 24:53), thereby fulfilling the true purpose for which the temple existed, in contrast to those who had turned the temple into a place of financial advantage (Luke 19:45–48).

God acts in history to fulfill his saving promises, and the fulfillment of such promises reveals how glorious and great and beautiful God is. The gift of salvation is not prized over the giver. The gift reveals the giver in all his power, love, and goodness. Hence, people responded by praising and honoring God for the salvation that they received. The heart of NT theology is the work of God in Christ in saving his people, and such saving work brings praise, honor, and glory to God.

## **GOD AS FATHER**

A theme that is remarkably prominent in the Synoptics is the fatherhood of God. Scholars in the past emphasized the distinctiveness of Jesus' calling God "Father." Jeremias in particular called attention to the uniqueness of Jesus' use of the term "Father" in terms of his experience with God.<sup>2</sup> Some references to God as "Father" exist in Jewish literature previous to the time of Jesus, but the frequency with which Jesus used the term stands out. Jesus distinctively and emphatically addressed God as "Father." Some have concluded that the frequency and intimacy of the term indicates that "Father" is equivalent to "Abba," which is then rendered "Daddy." Surely Jesus' relationship with God was intimate and unique, and his many references to God as "Father" are distinctive. Still, it goes beyond the evidence, as Barr has demonstrated, to conclude that "Father" should be equated with "Daddy."<sup>3</sup>

Identifying God as "the Father in heaven" also highlights his authority and sovereignty. This is confirmed by the observation elsewhere in Matthew that heaven is God's throne (Matt 5:34; 23:22). The Father is also designated as "Lord of heaven and earth" (Matt 11:25; Luke 10:21). Heaven represents that which is transcendent and invisible to human beings, and so it is striking when God speaks from heaven (Matt 3:16–17). The authority and power of the Father are evident, for he sees what people do in secret and will reward them accordingly (Matt 6:4, 6, 18). Nothing is hidden from his gaze, and as Father, he knows what his people need before they voice their requests (Matt 6:8, 32). Only the Father knows the day on which the Son is returning, and this date is hidden from angels and even from the Son (Matt 24:36). Since God is the sovereign Father, human beings are required to do his will and to obey what he says (Matt 7:21; 12:50; cf. 10:32–33).

Jesus testifies to the Father's authority, asking him to remove the cup from him, and such a request would be pointless if God could not change the oncoming circumstances (Mark 14:36). Simi-

larly, Jesus remarked that if he were to appeal to the Father, twelve legions of angels would prevent his suffering and death (Matt 26:53). Hence, when Jesus died, he commended his spirit to his Father (Luke 23:46). The uniqueness of God as Father is such that no human being should be accorded the title "Father" with the same significance that applies to God (Matt 23:9). The term "Father" is part of the divine name (Matt 28:19), and the Son of Man comes with the glory that belongs only to the Father (Matt 16:27).

## **THE GOSPEL OF JOHN**

John assumes the monotheism established in the OT (John 1:1; 17:3). No one has ever seen God, since he is invisible and his glory overwhelms human beings (John 1:18). When John says "God is spirit" (John 4:24), he means, according to Barrett, that God "is invisible and unknowable,"<sup>4</sup> and thus imperceptible to human beings. Despite God being a spirit and invisible, John does not teach that God is unknowable, for the entire thrust of this Gospel is that God has revealed himself in his Son, and that the Father has sent the Son. The God of the Gospel of John is not a silent God. He has spoken to his people through the OT Scriptures (e.g., John 5:45–47; cf. 9:29), and finally and supremely in Jesus (John 1:18; 14:9). God has not only spoken, but also he has acted. In particular, God has demonstrated his love for the world in sending his Son for its salvation (John 3:16; 20:30–31). God sent the Son to save the world, not to condemn it (John 3:17), and hence the Son is God's supreme gift to the world (John 4:10).

The God who has revealed himself to human beings is truth, and hence he is trustworthy (John 3:33). He has manifested his glory to the world in sending his Son to die as the Lamb of God for the sin of the world (John 11:4, 40; 13:31–32; 17:1, 4, 5). God's love and mercy, of course, are not all that can be said of God. John, with his realized eschatology, emphasizes that unbelievers already stand under God's judgment. Those who do not believe are condemned already, and God's wrath remains

on them (John 3:18, 36), but he also teaches that there will be an end-time judgment for those who practice evil (John 5:29).

John emphasizes that salvation is God's work and cannot be accomplished or effected by human beings. Those who are saved have been born of God (John 1:13; 3:3, 5, 7). The new life is bestowed supernaturally by God himself. The gift character of salvation is emphasized in John. Those who come to the Son in belief are given by the Father to the Son (John 6:37). Jesus grants eternal life only to those whom the Father has given to him (John 17:2), and Jesus reveals God's name to those whom God has given him (John 17:6, 24). Jesus restricted his prayer to those whom the Father has given him (John 17:9), and he fulfilled the Father's will in preserving to the end all those given to him by the Father (John 6:39). He also prayed that the Father would keep and preserve them until the last day (John 17:11, 15); hence, they will never apostatize and will be raised from the dead on the last day. If people are not drawn by the Father to the Son, they will be unable to come to Jesus for life (John 6:44). Conversely, those whom the Father has taught will certainly come to Jesus (John 6:45). They are part of the flock given to Jesus by the Father (John 10:29), whereas those who failed to believe were not given by the Father to the Son (John 6:64–65).

Human beings are called upon to give glory to God in all that they do. Hence, the man born blind to whom Jesus restored sight should glorify and praise God for his healing (John 9:24). Jesus healed Lazarus (John 11:4, 40), conducted his ministry, and went to his death (John 13:31–32; 17:1, 4, 5) to bring glory to God, for God is glorified in the work of his Son. The object and the aim of human existence is to bring glory to God, and so we see that the foundational theme of NT theology—the glory of God—is central in John's Gospel as well. Peter's death, though gruesome, will bring glory to God, presumably because he will die for the sake of Jesus Christ (John 21:19). The Jews who did not believe in Jesus are indicted

because rather than prizing God's glory, they lived for the approbation and respect of human beings (John 5:44; 12:43). They were not animated by love for God (John 5:42), but rather they lived to please people.

The fatherhood of God, as in the Synoptic Gospels, is central in John's Gospel. Indeed, the fatherhood of God is emphasized even more in John than in the Synoptics. What is particularly striking, however, is that John does not emphasize that God is the Father of believers. Instead, the focus is on God as the Father of Jesus. Jesus' intimate relationship with God is such that he often refers to God as "my Father." Jesus clearly distinguished between his unique relationship with the Father and the relationship that his disciples enjoyed with the Father. Jesus is the exclusive and unique Son of the Father.

## **ACTS**

The God of Acts is the sovereign God who fulfills his plans in the stream of redemptive history. The time of fulfillment is in God's hands, for he has "fixed by his own authority" "times or seasons" (Acts 1:7). Stephen proclaimed God's sovereignty in his speech in Acts 7, and in doing so he reflects the worldview of the OT. A persistent theme in Acts is that God has fulfilled prophecy in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:17–36; 3:11–26; 4:9–12; 24:14–15; 26:6–7, 22–23; 28:23). Paul emphasized in his sermon at Antioch that God's promises fulfilled in Jesus are part and parcel of God's covenant made with Israel from the beginning, that the Davidic covenant reaches its fulfillment in Jesus (Acts 13:16–41). The saving promises that are being realized in redemptive history are the promises of *God*; he is acting to carry out his will and purposes.

The narrative in Acts, of course, features the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Luke recounts again and again that the acceptance of the gospel by the Gentiles is due to the sovereignty of God. That God sovereignly works out his plan is clear from all of Acts. The martyrdom of Stephen was a

great tragedy, but it led to the scattering of believers and the spreading of the word (Acts 8:1–4). The conversion of Paul, related three times in Acts (Acts 9:1–19; 22:1–16; 26:1–23), testified to God’s sovereign work in both saving Paul and in appointing him as the missionary to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Luke concludes the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas with the explanation that God “had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27; cf. 15:4, 12). Peter recalled at the Jerusalem Council how God determined that the Gentiles (Cornelius and his friends) heard the gospel and believed through his ministry (Acts 15:7). The priority of God’s grace is quite clear from the response of the Gentiles to Paul’s gospel in Acts 13:48: “And as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” Luke highlights God’s grace that secures the response of belief in the hearts of Gentiles. Acts emphasizes that God is working out his saving plan for the world. He is fulfilling his covenantal promises through Jesus Christ and bringing to pass what he pledged.

God’s sovereign rule over all things does not mean that everything that occurs is intrinsically good. For instance, in Acts 12 Herod took action against the church and beheaded James the brother of John. Luke records the event abruptly and without detail. The death of James scarcely led to the conclusion that God is not in control, for Peter was released supernaturally, probably because of the church’s fervent prayers. Luke is not suggesting that the church failed to pray for James. He offers no explanation for the deliverance of Peter and the execution of James, proposing no neatly packaged answer for why some suffer and others are spared. God’s rule over the world does not lend itself to formulas by which evil can be easily explained. Given Luke’s worldview, he must have believed that God *could have* delivered James as well, and yet no reason for God’s actions are given. The rationale for much of what happens is obscured from human vision. Still, God’s control over all is conveyed powerfully by the conclusion of the story. The same Herod who executed

James is struck dead by God when he fails to give God glory.

God’s rule over all is featured supremely in the death of Christ. Christ’s death, as Acts 2:23 indicates, was due to God’s predestined plan and foreknowledge. God’s plan from the beginning was that Christ die for the sins of his people. And yet Acts 2:23 also declares that those who put Christ to death should not have done so and are held responsible for their evil behavior. This same perspective appears in Acts 4:27–28, where Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and even Jewish leaders conspired against Jesus in putting him to death. Nevertheless, what happened to Jesus was in accord with God’s plan and predestined purpose (Acts 4:28).

One of Luke’s themes, therefore, is that God’s purpose and plan cannot be thwarted. This perspective is summarized well by the Pharisee Gamaliel, who cautioned his contemporaries from waging an all-out campaign of violence against Christians, lest they find themselves fighting a fruitless battle against God himself (Acts 5:34–39). The nature of God’s purpose in Luke-Acts is often denoted by the words “it is necessary” (*dei*). The death and resurrection of Jesus are necessarily part of God’s plan (Luke 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 24:7). Indeed, everything that occurs in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus fulfills God’s plan found in the Scriptures (Luke 22:7; 24:44). God’s plan and purpose will be accomplished because he is the true and living God who made the world (Acts 4:24, 28).

The God of Acts is the God of mission. He sovereignly and lovingly acts to fulfill his saving promises to bless all nations through Abraham. He intervenes in history to carry out his purposes, whether that involves initiating the conversion of Paul, or bringing Peter to Cornelius to proclaim the gospel, or frustrating Jewish attempts to bring the ministry of Paul to an end.

## **THE PAULINE LITERATURE**

The centrality of God pulsates through Paul’s theology. Paul stands in line with his Jewish

heritage in confessing that God is one (1 Cor 8:4, 6; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5). This one God is also the Father (Eph 4:6), from whom every family on earth receives its name (Eph 3:14–15). It is clear, therefore, that Paul, despite his high Christology, does not depart from Jewish monotheism.

Paul defines sin as the de-godding of God, as the failure to thank and glorify God (Rom 1:21). The root sin consists in worshiping and serving the creature rather than the creator (Rom 1:25). Paul indicts his fellow Jews as sinners because their actions have caused unbelievers to revile God's name (Rom 2:24). Idolatry, then, must be shunned (1 Cor 10:14), for God brooks no competitors (1 Cor 10:21–22) and will not tolerate those who try to serve him and yet compromise by eating in the temples of idols.

Paul states the truth of God's supremacy in a myriad of different ways. Believers exist for God's sake (1 Cor 8:6), so that the entirety of their lives should reflect his beauty. This explains why Paul can say that believers are to do all things for God's glory, including eating or drinking (1 Cor 10:31). Elsewhere the same thought is expressed when Paul declares that believers ought to give thanks for all things (Eph 5:20), and this gratefulness manifests itself when believers acknowledge God's lordship over every area of their lives (Rom 14:7–9). The importance of gratefulness is confirmed by the thanksgiving introductions in almost every Pauline letter (see also 2 Cor 2:14; 8:16; 1 Thess 2:13).

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ is not an abstract entity. He has structured all of history so that it finds apex, summation, and unification in Christ (Eph 1:9–10). He is "the King of the ages" (1 Tim 1:17). Lau says that in the Pastoral Epistles the emphasis is "on the transcendent sovereignty and majesty of the eternal, invisible and incomprehensible God."<sup>5</sup> Even when he hardens someone like Pharaoh, he continues to be just and righteous (Rom 9:14–18), and he dulls those who reject his gracious offers so that they have no capacity to discern the truth and be saved (2 Thess 2:11–12). He is the sovereign Lord who rules and

reigns over history, showing severity to some and kindness to others (Rom 11:22). The election of Israel, their hardening to the gospel, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and the end-time final salvation of Israel are all part of God's wise plan (Rom 9:1–11:32). God's work in history and the fulfillment of his saving promises cause Paul's heart to well up in praise to God for his inscrutable wisdom and unsurpassed knowledge (Rom 11:33–35). He confesses that God deserves all the glory because "from him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36).

God's grace reveals his mercy and love, which are so great that believers will never come to the end of the wonder of what God has done for them in Christ (Eph 2:7–8). God's wisdom will be on display forever for the work that he has accomplished in the church and in Christ Jesus (Eph 3:9–11). God's ultimate purpose in the church is to evoke the recognition of his glory (Eph 3:21). We see, then, God's supremacy in all of the Pauline letters. Paul does not propound an abstract and philosophical doctrine of God separated from everyday life. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, the one who fulfills his saving promises, and the one who is to be praised in all things.

## HEBREWS

God is the sovereign creator of the entire universe (Heb 11:3). He rested after completing his creative work (Heb 4:4), not because he was weary, but because his work was completed. The majestic opening to the letter reminds readers that the God whom they worship reveals himself authoritatively in human words. He spoke his word through the prophets in the past, but now he has spoken definitively and finally in the Son (Heb 1:1–2). The author of Hebrews clearly believes that God has revealed himself and spoken through the OT Scriptures. The author introduces OT citations with a number of expressions that emphasize God's speech (Heb 1:5–8, 13; 4:3, 7; 5:5–6; 7:21; 8:8; 10:5). The author of Hebrews clearly views

God as a “talking God,” one who exists (Heb 11:6) and is not silent. The God who has spoken cannot lie (Heb 6:18); hence, the readers must pay heed to what has been uttered (Heb 2:1; cf. 11:7).

Human beings should hold God in awe and reverence because he “is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). Falling into the hands of the God who inflicts his vengeance on those who abandon him is terrifying (Heb 10:27–31). His word pierces swiftly and penetratingly, and no human being can hide from the creator God. Hence humans must continue to trust in God if they wish to avoid the sword of judgment (Heb 4:12–13).

As the creator of all things (Heb 3:4), the living God has subjected the world to Christ (Heb 2:8); God possesses the power to raise the dead (Heb 11:19), just as he raised Jesus Christ (Heb 13:20); and he has promised to establish a heavenly city in the future (Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22). He will shake the world in the future so that his kingdom is established and the wicked are removed from the scene (Heb 12:26–28). This God of salvation and judgment is the one “for whom and through whom all things exist” (Heb 2:10). In other words, all human beings are to live to honor him. They are to praise his name and do good because these are the sacrifices that bring him pleasure (Heb 13:15–16). Human beings please God by trusting in him and believing in his existence (Heb 11:5–6).

## **JAMES**

James says nothing about God that would surprise anyone rooted in OT piety. The oneness of God is assumed (Jas 2:19), though James warns his readers that assent to such is scarcely sufficient, since even demons recognize this truth. In a letter that concentrates on the responsibility of believers, we expect the theme of God’s judgment. He is the eschatological judge who will exalt poor believers and humiliate rich unbelievers, for the rich oppress God’s people and revile God’s name (Jas 1:9–11; 2:6–7; 5:1–5). God will show mercy as the end-time judge only to those who show mercy to those in need (Jas 2:12–13). Hence, if believ-

ers cast their lot with rich unbelievers, they reveal their antagonism to God. If the rich who revile God’s name will be judged for their behavior, then it follows that believers are to honor God’s name, particularly by their godly lifestyle.

In the midst of sufferings James calls attention to God’s goodness. If they need wisdom, God is the source of all wisdom, and he grants his gifts to people generously and gladly, not grudgingly (Jas 1:5). Similarly, in the midst of trials believers are inclined to think that God is tempting them. James assures them that God does not lure humans into sin (Jas 1:13). God finds evil utterly repulsive, and so he would never entice humans to sin. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (Jas 1:17). Believers can cling to God in the midst of life’s pressures because he longs to bless them. His goodness is reflected in both the old creation and the new creation. He is the “Father of lights” (Jas 1:17). James probably alludes here to the creation of the sun, moon, and stars in Genesis, (Gen 1:15–16). The loveliness of the sun, moon, and stars testifies to God’s beauty. Finally, James 1:17 emphasizes that God is unalterably good. He is not changeable—one day generous and the next day stingy. His character remains the same. He does not vary from season to season or year to year.

The letter of James highlights God’s just judgment and his generous goodness. Both themes are included so that believers will not depart from God but instead will put their trust in him.

## **1 PETER**

Peter addresses believers suffering for their faith in Christ, encouraging them to persevere and maintain a witness by their good works in a hostile world. He often emphasizes that God is sovereign so that the suffering of those addressed accords with God’s will (1 Pet 3:17; 4:19). Dominion and sovereignty belong to God forever (1 Pet 5:11). He foreknew the time in salvation history when Jesus Christ would arrive (1 Pet 1:20), and so the entire course of history is

under his supervision and jurisdiction.

Believers are encouraged to place their trust (1 Pet 4:19) and hope (1 Pet 1:13; cf. 1:21) in God, knowing that he is sovereign over all things. They know that he is a God who lifts up the humble and debases the proud (1 Pet 5:5), and so they can give to God all their worries and concerns (1 Pet 5:7) because they are assured that he will vindicate them on the last day and grant them eschatological salvation (1 Pet 1:3–9; 5:10). Believers live before a sovereign God and Father who will reward them on the last day (1 Pet 3:10–12) and will judge them impartially (1 Pet 1:17). God, therefore, is not to be trifled with but must be feared as the holy one (1 Pet 1:17; 2:17). Believers must live holy lives in accord with the God who called them to himself (1 Pet 1:15–16; 5:10). They are summoned to live for the will of God rather than the pleasures of this age (1 Pet 4:2). They should live consciously in the presence of God in everything they do (cf. 1 Pet 2:19).

Believers have been the recipients of God's saving mercy (1 Pet 1:3–9; 2:10), and so they know the wonders of his love. They were foreknown for salvation by God before the world was inaugurated (1 Pet 1:1). As God chose Israel of old, so also he has elected believers to be his children, his elect sojourners in an evil world (1 Pet 1:1). God has bestowed his grace upon them and called them to salvation (1 Pet 5:10), and his calling has secured a response from his people. Believers have been born again through the word of the gospel (1 Pet 1:3, 23).

Peter communicates in a variety of ways that salvation is of the Lord: believers are God's elect, foreknown, chosen, and born-again. The reference to God's "mighty hand" (1 Pet 5:6) alludes to the exodus, where God delivered his people from Egyptian bondage (e.g., Exod 3:19; Deut 4:34; 5:15; 6:21). The salvation given in Jesus Christ is the new exodus, to which the Egyptian liberation pointed (cf. 1 Pet 1:10–12). Believers are guarded by God's power even now so that they will obtain eschatological salvation (1 Pet 1:5). In response, believers should bless and praise God for his

extraordinary mercy and grace in their lives (1 Pet 1:3). They should proclaim his excellencies in worship and evangelism (1 Pet 2:9).

## **2 PETER AND JUDE**

We will examine the letters of 2 Peter and Jude together because both are brief, and the content of Jude overlaps significantly with 2 Peter 2. Both letters react to the presence of false teachers in the churches. Therefore, one of the major themes in both letters is God's righteous judgment of sinners (Jude 4–16; 2 Pet 2:3–16; 3:7, 10). God is ever the holy one, and those who live dissolute lives will not stand in his presence on the eschatological day. The judgments on sinning angels, the flood generation, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Israel anticipate the final judgment that will be meted out by God on the false teachers and those who follow in their wake (Jude 5–7; 2 Pet 2:4–6). The message of God's judgment, of course, is not novel; it is rooted in OT revelation where God judges those who despise him and fail to do his will.

God's final judgment of evil cannot be separated from his sovereignty. If God were not Lord, then he would lack the power to enforce his judgment. Peter particularly calls this fact to the readers's attention by reminding them of creation and the flood (2 Pet 3:5–6). Both creation and the flood signify God's rule over the universe. He brought the world into existence initially by his word and through water. Similarly, water and the word were the means he employed to destroy the world through a cataclysm. The readers can be assured, then, that God is able to intervene in the world. Contrary to the false teachers who deny the future coming of the Lord (2 Pet 3:4), the cosmos will not continue without interruption. The world is not independent of God but rather is subject to his will, even to his catastrophic interventions. Indeed, history will conclude with a fiery consumption of heaven and earth (2 Pet 3:7, 10, 12) because God is the sovereign ruler of history.

Both 2 Peter and Jude feature God's grace as well. The grace of God frames Jude's letter, for he

commences by reminding readers that they are called by God to be his children. God has specially set his love upon them, and they are protected and kept from the designs of the intruders by Jesus Christ himself (Jude 1). The letter concludes with a doxology (Jude 24–25) that returns to the theme of God’s sustaining love. He is able to keep believers from succumbing to apostasy. Jude likely means by this that God *will* keep the readers from apostasy. The reference to God’s love probably alludes to his saving work in calling believers to himself. Indeed, mercy, peace, and love flow into the lives of believers only from God himself (Jude 2). One of the main themes of Jude, then, is that God is the one who saves. He sets his love on believers and guards them from apostasy.

The theme of grace also informs 2 Peter. Those who believe do so because God has granted them the saving gift of righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:1). The term “righteousness” here likely has an OT background referring to God’s saving activity (e.g., Ps 88:12; 98:2–3; Isa 42:6; 45:8; 46:13; Mic 6:5; 7:9). Such an understanding fits with 2 Peter 1:3–4, where everything that believers need for a godly life has been granted to them. One of Peter’s favorite words is “knowledge” (*epignosis*), and salvation is aptly described as knowledge of God (2 Pet 1:2; cf. 1:3, 8; 2:20). God’s love for his own is expressed in his election and calling of believers (2 Pet 1:10). Election refers to God’s choosing believers unto salvation, and calling likely refers to the grace that secures a believing response to the message of the gospel. God’s love is also expressed in his preservation of believers. Peter introduces the example of Noah and Lot (2 Pet 2:5–9) to underscore that God is able to preserve believers, even when they live in environments that are remarkably hostile to righteous living. He concludes, “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials” (2 Pet 2:9). God is not only a God of judgment but also one who grants grace and peace and salvation.

## 1 JOHN

John reminds his readers, as an antidote to the false teachers who have left the church (1 John 2:19), that “God is light” (1 John 1:5). In the context of 1 John he means by this that God is holy, for John goes on to say in the same verse that there is no darkness in God. God is radiantly and beautifully good and unstained by any moral defilement. Hence, anyone who claims to know God and yet practices evil contradicts the profession of allegiance to God.

The love of God shines out as a central theme in the letter. God displayed his love supremely in the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, who died on behalf of sinners and atoned for their sins (1 John 1:7; 2:2; 3:16; 4:9–10). John announces that “God is light” (1 John 1:5), and he also proclaims that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). For John, the love of God is displayed in the sending of Christ and his atonement on the cross. John particularly emphasizes that believers did not take the initiative in loving God. They did not demonstrate their devotion to God with their piety and thereby merit his love. One of the characteristic themes in John’s Gospel is that the Father sent the Son. The same theme is found in 1 John, and in every instance the Father sent the Son to bring salvation. God sent his Son so that human beings would enjoy new life (1 John 4:9). God sent him as an atoning sacrifice as a satisfaction for sins (1 John 4:10). Those who know God’s love personally are his dear children and have experienced the wonder and joy of being the children of God (1 John 3:1–2). God poured out his love on them first, and any love that believers express toward God is in response to his love (1 John 3:16; 4:10, 19). One of the fundamental themes of 1 John is that God’s love takes the initiative, so that human love is an answering love.

## REVELATION

In Revelation John addresses seven churches in Asia Minor to encourage and strengthen them in the face of Roman persecution and in the temptation to compromise with their surrounding social

world. Revelation is radically God-centered. The message of the book could be summarized in the angel's directive "Worship God" (Rev 19:10; 22:9). Believers will serve in God's presence forever and experience the comfort of his sheltering love (Rev 7:15). One of the prime reasons that God is worshiped and adored in Revelation is his sovereignty. John's message to a persecuted and afflicted church is that God reigns. God is designated in Revelation as the one "who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8). Here we have clear allusion to Exodus 3:14, where God reveals himself to Moses as "I am who I am." God is also designated as "the Alpha and Omega" (Rev 1:8; 21:6) and "the Almighty" (Rev 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). The words "Alpha and Omega" represent the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet, signifying that God reigns over all of history. No segment of history elapses apart from God's rule. The term "Almighty" (*pantokratōr*) underscores God's dominion over all things as well. It may seem that Rome exercises control over history, but God is working his purposes out as the Almighty One.

The churches that John addressed likely felt small and weak and perhaps were tempted to see themselves as victims of powers beyond their control. In response, John constantly emphasizes God's supremacy over all things. Thus he regularly uses the term "throne" to designate God's power and rule.<sup>6</sup>

One of the key chapters in Revelation is chapter 4, where John is granted a vision of God on his throne. The God revealed to him, however, is too glorious to be seen by human eyes. His glory is compared to priceless gems that radiate with beauty (Rev 4:3). We have a clear allusion here to the vision of God in Ezekiel 1:26–28, where Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord and describes God in similar terms. Entering God's presence is fearsome because something like a massive thunderstorm blazes in his presence. The angels surrounding the throne echo the words of the seraphim in Isa. 6:3 with the words "Holy, holy, holy" (Rev 4:8). The

God on the throne is transcendent, terrible and beautiful in his holiness. The holy and sovereign one is the creator of all that is (Rev 4:11). Indeed, he is the sovereign Lord precisely because he is the creator. The one who brought all things into existence also determines the course of human history. The destruction of Babylon by the beast and the ten kings is the work of God himself; he put it into their minds to destroy the great city (Rev 17:16–17). For John, none of this is abstract theology, for the vision of God on his throne tears back the curtain on reality. The four living creatures and twenty-four elders fall down and worship in God's presence as he rules from his throne (Rev 4:8–11). The worship given by the angels should be replicated by human beings. When humans see God in his holiness and recognize him as king, perceiving him in all his glory, they will be stunned into worshipping him as creator and Lord.

As we have noted already, one of the central themes of Revelation is that God should be worshiped. He deserves praise because salvation comes from him (Rev 7:10–12). He is worshiped because he will accomplish his kingdom promises (Rev 11:15–19), both in recompensing evil and in rewarding his servants. Another way of describing conversion is to say that when people are saved, they give glory to God (Rev 11:13; 14:7); they worship him as their creator and lord. Unbelievers worship the beast (Rev 13:15), but those who know God refuse to succumb to economic pressure to bow before the emperor (Rev 14:9–12). Those who know God sing the same song of worship hymned by Moses in Exodus 15, declaring that God deserves praise for his saving deeds, his unutterable beauty, his justice, and his goodness (Rev 15:3–4).

One of the pervasive themes in Revelation is that God judges the wicked. The God who rules over all and is the creator of all will righteously requite those who practice evil and resist his authority. Rome and the Roman Empire, depicted as the new Babylon and the beast respectively, wreak havoc upon God's people. Revelation

depicts the judgments that will be unleashed upon those who do not know God (Rev 6:1–17; 8:1–9:21; 14:14–20; 15:1–16:21; 17:1–19:4; 20:11–15). The God who inflicts judgment and is the holy one is full of wrath because of the evil of human beings (Rev 6:17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15).

Is God an arbitrary and unjust judge? Does he pour out his judgments with a vindictive fury that is unwarranted and excessive? John emphasizes repeatedly that people deserve the judgments they receive (Rev 16:6–7; 18:5–6; 19:2). Human beings are judged not by an arbitrary standard but in accord with the works that they have done (Rev 20:11–15). Before the bowl judgments are poured out, God is extolled as king because his ways are “just and true” (Rev 15:3). The punishment meted out fits with the extent of the crime. Indeed, the judgments were designed to provoke people to repent, but people stubbornly refuse to change their ways (Rev 9:20–21; 16:9, 11). Those who repent give glory to God, honoring his justice by admitting wrongdoing, but those who are recalcitrant reject and curse God (Rev 16:8–11), for they hate any intrusion by him into their lives. They do not repent, because they desire to worship their idols rather than God (Rev 9:20).

God’s judgments, therefore, do not call into question his justice but rather express it. Therefore, the people of God respond to his judgments by praising and worshiping him (Rev 19:1, 3, 4). The four living creatures join the chorus with the words “Amen! Hallelujah!” (Rev 19:4).

## CONCLUSION

Our survey of “God” in the NT reveals that he is foundational for NT theology. The God of the NT is not a new God; he is the God of the OT—the creator and redeemer. The promise of universal blessing given to Abraham and his descendants in the OT is fulfilled by this God. He is a God of love and mercy, so that he fulfills his saving promises to bless the whole world. He is the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ and offers salva-

tion to all through the crucified and risen one. He is the sovereign God who rules over all of history, and hence the words that he has spoken are reliable and true. Because he is sovereign, he is able to fulfill his saving promises. At the same time, as the sovereign God, he judges those who practice evil, demonstrating that evil will not have the last word. All human beings are called upon to honor and worship the creator God. All their energy and strength are to be used to praise him, and God is particularly glorified when human beings trust him and therefore obey him.

## PASTORAL REFLECTION

All human beings are summoned to trust God for three reasons. First, as the sovereign God he rules over all. Hence, he can secure the future for those who give their lives to him. Second, his love demonstrated in the sending of his Son reveals that he is worthy of trust, that he truly loves human beings. Third, failure to trust and obey him is disastrous, for he will judge the wicked.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 54.

<sup>2</sup>Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1967), 11–67.

<sup>3</sup>James Barr, “‘Abbā’ Isn’t ‘Daddy’” *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (1988): 28–47.

<sup>4</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 238.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew Y. Lau, *Manifest in the Flesh: The Epiphany Christology of the Pastoral Epistles* (Wissenschaft zum Neuen Testament 2/86; Tübingen: Siebeck, 1996), 271.

<sup>6</sup>Rev 1:4; 3:21; 4:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10; 5:1, 6, 7, 11, 13; 6:16; 7:9, 10, 11, 15, 17; 8:3; 12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4, 5; 20:11, 12; 21:3, 5; 22:1, 3.