



# 6 Categories You Need To Know

# Introduction: Why You Need Categories

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**WHEN POLLSTERS ASK** Christians on the street what they believe and why, many answers boil down to the idea that God wants us to be good people, to live good lives, to be happy, and to follow our hearts. If that's what we think, we will needlessly struggle with our faith and find the Bible confusing.

This is the case of mistaken categories. We inadvertently transform gospel into law; we try to make the Bible speak where it hasn't; we confuse God's work with our own. This Core Guide written by Core Christianity contributor Ty Gregory is meant to equip you with important theological categories that can help you read and understand the Bible and articulate what you believe and why.

But having the right categories is about more than just having theological precision. These doctrines provide the foundation that enable us to live out our faith confidently in a complicated world. Understanding these distinctions makes a marked difference in our lives—the difference between striving and rest, despair and hope, anxiety and trust. We hope this resource helps you experience confidence in your faith and the comfort of the gospel.

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**IMAGINE ACCIDENTALLY SHOWING UP** to a neurosurgeon's office when you meant to see a plastic surgeon. The neurosurgeon wouldn't be able to help you, not because he's incompetent, but because his training wasn't designed for it. Knowing the difference between plastic and neural surgery is helpful because it prepares you to expect certain things from each kind of doctor. This is as true in theology as it is in medicine. Theologians make a distinction between general and special revelation because they detect two different purposes behind these forms of divine communication. Just like a patient can expect unique treatments from plastic and neurosurgeons, a Christian can expect unique messages from general and special revelation.

## GENERAL REVELATION

General revelation has unique tools to communicate its message about God. The tools of general revelation are created things. According to Psalm 19, both "the heavens" (19:1) and "the law of the Lord" (19:7) reveal God's character. In the first half of this poem, the heavens are depicted as a living art piece that announces God's active presence in the world (19:1–6). The day-night pattern of creation is like a loud voice that applauds God's fame (19:1–4). And the predictable rising then setting of the sun is a daily exhibition of God's creative skill (19:5–6). Creation, in other words, is God's masterpiece. The patterns and beauty embedded within it are clear strokes of a divine artist. Its message about God is simple yet profound—the Creator is wise and powerful.

If the "heavens" are the visual theater of God's creative glory on a global scale, then the "law of the Lord" is the personal stage of God's morally compelling character. God's standards for right relationships cause the

poet's heart and soul in Psalm 19 to be renewed (19:7–8), his moral and emotional intelligence to soar (19:9), and seeking justice to be his life's purpose (19:10–11). God's moral law, in other words, is like a compass that centers the poet's life by directing him back to the perfect law-giver. He knows that God's standards are simultaneously life-giving yet impossible for him to perform. That's why the poet closes his song by recommitting his imperfect steps to God. Despite his flaws, he trusts God to declare him innocent (19:12). The message about God in the moral law is that God satisfies the demands of divine justice.

General revelation is important for everyday life because it teaches us that God has blended wisdom into every created thing. This infusion of patterns, beauty, and morality in the world not only makes the study of physics, art, and ethics possible, it also reflects the divine mind who made them. Though this panoramic message about God is compelling, notice what is left out. There is nothing about humanity's rescue, the Trinity, the hope of resurrection life, or the renewal of creation. But that's not the purpose of general revelation. It describes in broad terms who God is with respect to *the world*. It's the purpose of special revelation, on the other hand, to describe who God is with respect to *humanity* as a fractured and rebellious people.

## SPECIAL REVELATION

If general revelation depicts God as Creative Artist and Judge, special revelation portrays God as our Father. Rather than using creation as his tool, God uses Scripture to communicate this unique message. When the twelve apostles ask Jesus for a prayer lesson, he teaches them to address God as their Father because he's always already listening to their concerns (Matt. 6:8–9). God

isn't a distracted, uninterested, or distant deity. Nor is he a harsh disciplinarian. Even when Christians experience setbacks because of sin, God corrects them as his children (Heb. 12:5–7). He never does this for the sake of mere punishment. Instead, God uses those opportunities to train his children to live like the royal sons and daughters he has called them to be (Heb. 12:11). Or in the apostle Paul's words, God uses these moments to reset Christians. To set them on the right path and help them walk in the good works God has prepared for them (2 Tim. 3:15–17). Without special revelation, Christians could negatively interpret their experience of discipline, assuming God is out to get them because they sinned. But the voices of Jesus, Paul and others in Scripture remind us of God's fatherly care for his children.

Special revelation also uniquely explains how God became our Father. In his famous high priestly prayer, Jesus summarizes his mission by saying that he came to make God known as the Father (John 17:26). He said this right before he was betrayed, illegally put on trial,

and sentenced to a publicly shameful death on the cross. Though it's counterintuitive, these events especially reveal God as Father, because God used Jesus' death on the cross to give us new life (Isa. 25:8). Jesus' death defeated death itself (Hos. 13:14), and our passport no longer says refugee or exile. Instead, it's stamped with permanent citizenship in the kingdom of God (Eph. 2:19). After all, the promise of a future inheritance is guaranteed by Jesus' resurrection from the dead (1 Pet. 1:4). So we have open access to God as our Father as long as Jesus lives. This is an incredible hope that can only be known from special revelation.

When you want to celebrate God as Creator, explore his beautiful creation. Enjoy his captivating artistry. Wonder in the wisdom blended into the world. Appreciate the patterns and rhythms of it all. When you want to celebrate God as Father, read the Scriptures. Trust his promises. Long for the kingdom to come. Renew your hope in the risen Jesus. And pray for his goodness to be known by all.

# Indicatives and Imperatives

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**DON'T WORRY, THIS ISN'T** an article about grammar. I don't want to bore you with verb moods and why they're important. What I want to do, instead, is show you how Scripture uses language to invite us into a new story, to cast us as characters in a life-giving script, and to make us into actors of the kingdom of God. This is because indicatives create new identities for the people of God and imperatives give them a script for living into the roles they now play.

## INDICATIVES

Stories are filled with indicatives. They're statements of fact. When an author vividly depicts a setting, sketches a charming portrait of the characters, or records the words of a tense conversation, she does so in the indicative mood. These verbs are action words that shape the storyline of each scene.

Similar things are true when Scripture uses indicative verbs. They narrate events such as "Jesus walked to Jerusalem" or "Jesus wept." The verbs "walked" and "wept" are both in the indicative mood and move the plot forward. Yet Scripture can also use indicative verbs in more profound ways. Rather than simply describe an event, indicative verbs create new realities.

One of my favorite examples of this is found in 1 Peter. Peter uses the indicative verb "you are" to make a strange claim about Christian suffering (2:9). Though these Christians have been misunderstood and even mistreated, they are in fact a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for [God's] own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). This is a surprising message, because this community's Christian identity made them outcasts in their own society. Their exclusion from public life in Rome, however, didn't mean God also shunned them. On the contrary,

Peter crowns this wounded community of Jesus's followers as privileged members of the kingdom of God.

In most societies, pain is viewed as a sign of defeat. In the kingdom of God, on the other hand, unjust suffering is actually a sign of one's entrance into the life of the risen Jesus. Since Jesus himself suffered injustice (2:21-25), the meaning of pain is reimagined within the kingdom-of-God story. That's because the self-donation of Jesus on the cross becomes a source of healing and hope for communities of faith. Since their identity is found in the story of the cross, they can wear the scars of injustice along with the crown of resurrection life at the same time.

That's what indicative verbs do in the gospel. They gift God's people with new identities in the story he's telling about the world. This enables Christians to reclaim their value and purpose. Rather than being defined by cultural labels, the people of God receive renewed identities as actors in the kingdom of God.

## IMPERATIVES

Imperatives are direct speeches that demand immediate responses. They're like marching orders a general gives to a cadet. If he commands *jump* or *stop*, that action is required instantly.

These kinds of verbs are common in Scripture as well. They range from simple negative commands such as *not* praying like hypocrites who want to be seen praying because it makes them appear devout (Matt. 6:5), to seemingly radical commands such as gouging one's eye out rather than commit adultery (5:29). Yet there's more to imperatives than that. Imperatives are like the scripts that help the kingdom-of-God actors lean into their new roles with passion and insight.

Once again, Peter beautifully connects Christian

identity with Christian responsibility. He first creates a role for God's people in the story of God by defining them as "sojourners" and "exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11). Or, to use a modern analogy, these Christians are like refugees in God's good yet fractured world. Then he summons these refugees to practices of self-restraint and integrity that help them align their roles in the kingdom-of-God story (2:11-12).

Notice the pattern here. The new identity comes *before* the script. It's not that a Christian becomes a Christian by practicing self-denial and honesty. The refugee ethic only makes sense after one belongs to the refugee community. This is the important difference between indicatives and imperatives. Indicatives always come before imperatives because our identity defines our responsibilities.

The Christian life isn't an endless pursuit of trying to gain God's attention. God doesn't hit a divine "like" button when he finally approves of our performance. It would be exhausting to continually strive after divine approval in this way. God first casts us as actors in the

kingdom-of-God story before he gives us our lines. He gifts us the identity of adopted children, sons and daughters of the crucified yet risen king, then summons us to live like royalty (Gal. 4:5). Reciting the script doesn't make us suitable for the role. Our identity and belonging in his family make our performance of the script possible.

## **EMBRACE YOUR NEW IDENTITY**

If you feel like you've lost your identity, read the Scriptures and be surprised by God's extravagant welcome for refugees. The Scriptures tell a story of belonging for hurt and wandering people. They will help you reimagine your story so that it fits into the larger kingdom-of-God story. You'll gain a fresh start and a sacred purpose within the family of God. With this new identity will come a script that makes a claim on your life, because your life isn't your own once you've been adopted into God's family. I invite you to embrace your new identity as an actor in the life-giving story of God. You won't regret it.

**WE ALL WANT TO BELONG.** We vote for certain political parties, cheer on our favorite teams, rep the colors of our cherished universities, and interview at our dream jobs because we want to belong to them. Only their approval matters. Only their acceptance makes us important. Only their blessing will make us happy. Or so we think.

The sad truth about belonging is that it isn't easy. It's hard to get in, and it's even harder to stay in. But there's a beautiful exception to this in the community of Jesus's followers. It plays by a different set of rules. Belonging isn't created by a performance; it's donated as a gift. Your value is freely given, not earned. Your worth is permanent because it comes from the performance of Jesus, a performance that God himself recognized as the ideal human achievement.

Put theologically, belonging to the family of God comes through the gospel, not through the law. If your identity is shaped by law, you will never be enough, either to yourself or to God. If your identity is shaped by the gospel, on the other hand, you're already enough. Not because you've proven yourself, but because you embrace your true identity as a beloved child of God. Living by the gospel means you rest in God rather than trying to impress him. That's why you must know the difference between the law and the gospel.

## LAW

Acceptance takes work. You must beat the competition to get in. And if you make any wrong moves, you're pushed out by the person standing behind you who can't wait to take your place. This is how belonging works under law, because laws create standards and expectations. If you live up to them, you're in. If you don't, you're out.

Standards aren't always bad, though. In fact, they're

necessary in many situations. Trading a player who isn't at peak performance makes room for the next generation of athletes. Holding people accountable for crimes they commit keeps society healthy. Letting a doctor go who hasn't maintained his skills can save lives. In these cases, rejection is a way to uphold good expectations.

God has standards for his people as well. His laws are like boundaries that keep you from the danger zone on the other side. If you step outside the lines, you'll hurt yourself. If you stay within them, however, you'll live like an ideal human. Your life will flourish as you experience the fullness of God's presence and blessing. In this way, God's law is good. His standards protect your dignity and worth.

The problem with the law, however, is that it's a high-stakes game. The life and blessing and belonging that are promised in God's laws come after your performance (Deut. 30:17–18). While a high performance leads to acceptance, a poor performance leads to rejection. Even if you have a good performance, the approval you receive in one moment is not guaranteed in the future. You must prove yourself repeatedly to keep the reward. One wrong move can send you to the back of the line. This is why the law is a double-edged sword. Though its purposes are good, it always put you back on trial. Living by the law can only lead to fatigue, anxiety, and burnout.

## GOSPEL

The gospel doesn't work in this way. Whereas the law creates a standard that judges you, the gospel creates an identity that comes with the status you need to belong. Think of the gospel as a coronation ceremony. The daughter of a king never has to try out to belong to her family. Her acceptance into the royal line is guaranteed by her noble birth. She simply receives the status, reputation,

and accomplishments of her family because they are her inheritance. Her coronation ceremony doesn't come after she has proven herself worthy as an heir. It's a public announcement that confirms the royal identity she had at birth.

Biblical authors use similar images and language to describe acceptance into the family of God. In Galatians, for example, Paul contrasts law-belonging with gospel-belonging. Jesus lived under the pressures and demands of law-belonging (Gal. 4:4). His acceptance within Jewish society was determined by how well he lived out the teachings of the Torah. Paul says that Jesus perfectly met these expectations (Gal. 4:5), that he was the ideal Torah-keeper. Like a great king who represents us, his status and reputation are then given to us so that we would be treated like heirs in his kingdom (Gal. 4:5–6). In other words, the gospel is God's announcement that we are as his children (John 1:12).

This welcome into the family of God comes with generous benefits. Like a daughter who receives her father's kingdom, our adoption into Jesus's royal line is the birth-right we need to inherit a new creation (Rom. 4:13). The value of gospel-belonging is that our co-ownership of the kingdom of God is guaranteed by the performance of Jesus (Rom. 8:14–17). Put differently, Christians share in the rewards Jesus earned through his Torah-keeping. Which means you have divine approval through his

performance, not by your own effort. When you trust that his life, death, and resurrection are for you, you'll receive his status and inheritance as a gift. You'll discover what it means to have true freedom when your identity is hidden in Christ (Col. 3:3). Your value will be secure.

## EMBRACE GOSPEL-BELONGING

*Whose* you are shapes *who* you are. Don't be owned by your paycheck, your job title, or your followers. Don't be someone who always tries to prove yourself to others. You may never make it to the big leagues. You may never get your dream job. You may never get enough likes on Instagram or enough retweets on Twitter to go viral. But that's okay, because a life built on performances is life-taking. Don't desire *law-belonging*, embrace *gospel-belonging*. Anyone who is in Christ can hide in the safety of God's love. God doesn't turn away from you on your worst days. He doesn't condemn you when you don't measure up. He continues to love and accept you even when you least deserve it. Belonging to him means setting aside the need to impress. It means finding rest in his constant approval. It means discovering true freedom apart from your performances. It means being welcomed home every time you run away. Gospel-belonging is the most life-giving gift you can receive. In Christ, you are enough.



# 04

## Already and Not Yet

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**I LOVE TO TRAVEL.** It's not just exploring distant lands that I find thrilling. It's also the wanderlust. Getting lost for the sake of getting lost in unknown places is a powerful experience that keeps me wanting more. Coming home can be so disappointing because it's familiar. If only there were some way to permanently stay out on the road. . .

The Christian story is built on a similar tension between wandering and homecoming. Unlike my preference for the road, however, the Scriptures insist that our arrival is so much more fulfilling than the journey. Our resurrection and entrance into the new creation is the last act in the divine drama (Rev. 21:1–4). And yet, our lives are spent on the road, waiting for God to take us home. This is the already/not yet tension in the Christian life.

I want to explain how this works, but also why it's practically important. Because living between wandering and homecoming helps us to rediscover faith and hope in the risen Jesus, not only for what he *has* done but for what he *will* do. Theology then becomes more like biography because you realize God still has a place for you in his script. The story isn't over. You're actually being invited into something deeper and more fulfilling when you embrace the in-between.

### ALREADY

It all started with a promise. God committed himself to a family of immigrants so he could bring them to a new land they would one-day call home (Gen. 12:1). God pledged to give Abraham, the father of this family, a name that would be remembered and a large family that he would protect (Gen. 12:2–3). God's final vow was that Abraham himself would become a blessing to the nations. Through Abraham and to the world—that's how God wanted to bless all the families of the earth.

The apostle Paul says that Abraham's blessing is the good news in the Old Testament (Gal. 3:8). In other words, the whole Bible is about God extending Abraham's promised land blessing beyond this one family to include everyone. When that happens, Abraham becomes the father of blessing to all who trust in God's promise of homecoming (Rom. 4:11).

What God started with Abraham was finally completed by Jesus (Gal. 3:14). He is the one who blesses all the families of the earth because he is Abraham's true descendant (Gal. 3:16–17). Trusting in his death and resurrection allows anyone to become a child of Abraham (Rom. 4:16; 24).

This is the “already” aspect of the divine drama. The doors are opened for all to receive God's promise to Abraham. This is what we see in the first Jesus communities: former gentile immigrants are granted full citizenship in his kingdom (Eph. 2:12–13), children of slavery are turned into royalty (Gal. 4:7), and strangers are welcomed in as God's heirs (Eph. 2:19). Simply put, a new humanity is made (Eph. 2:15). Each member of this new family has equal access to God because they share a common identity in the crucified yet risen Jesus and uniting work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:16–17).

The story is over. Or so it seems. Even though we've been adopted into God's family, we're not yet home. This is where faith and hope come in. We trust in the return of Jesus and pray for his kingdom to come because, until we're finally with him, we're still wandering on the road.

### NOT YET

One image should shape our longing for Jesus's return more than any other while we wait for him—feasting. Because Jesus celebrates our homecoming by throwing

a party (Rev. 19:6–9). The only reason our reunion is delayed is because the ceremony is still being prepared. Like any great party, not only must the perfect location be found, but all the guests must arrive before the celebration begins.

Just the right place is closer than you might think. In fact, you're sort of there already. The hospitable and abundant creation God made at the beginning is the site of the new creation party. The only difference is that its current vandalized condition will one day be repaired (Rom. 8:21). God will restore the ruins of his original masterpiece until it not only matches but exceeds its former beauty (Rev. 21:22–27). *This* creation—but a renewed one—is the location of our reunion where Jesus will welcome us home. Not only will the presence of sin be removed, but the very possibility of our return to exile will be unimaginable (Rev. 22:3–5).

When creation is restored to its garden-like beauty, the final step is for the host to welcome his guests. Every culture and language from the corners of the earth will have a seat at Jesus's table (Rev. 7:9). Though this global feast will be beautifully diverse and multicultural, the guests will wear the same white robes (Rev. 7:9, 14). Unlike the exclusive red carpet displays of celebrities, the new creation feast embraces everyone as guests of honor. It's

not their status that has gained them entrance, but their belonging to the King who shares his inheritance with his beloved sons and daughters (Rev. 21:7). Everyone who has been rescued by the self-donation of Jesus on the cross is welcomed, healed, and made whole by his loving presence (Rev. 7:15–17). And their new resurrection bodies guarantee this party that will last forever (1 Cor. 15:50–53).

## **LIVING BETWEEN WANDERING & HOMECOMING**

The community of Jesus has an important role to play while they await their homecoming. You not only bear witness to the promise-keeping God, but care for other wounded strangers out on the road who need to hear the good news about Jesus (Eph. 3:10). You're like an outpost of the new creation, directing everyone toward its healing touch (Rev. 21:4). You live in sacred time with a sacred purpose because you're a guest of honor at the coming new creation feast. And you get to invite other privileged guests to the party. When your life is shaped by that story, you can't help but to spread the news. The location is perfect. The guests are arriving. Let the feast begin.



**I'M FASCINATED BY INFLUENCERS.** They share their beauty, life hacks, or expertise with thousands or even millions of followers at any time of day, and we'll instantly interrupt our lives to praise them for it. Though life always looks good at the top, I'm not so sure it really is. Without repeated success, someone below you will inevitably take your place. You can only stay at the top if you can keep it.

The Scriptures name this keep-it-if-you-can approach a "works" mentality. Not only is it exhausting, but God isn't even impressed when you try to get his attention in this way. Instead, his affirmation comes when you trust and receive the accomplishments of Jesus as your own. Unlike the keep-it-if-you-can mindset, a life of faith invites you to rest in God's approval without having to prove yourself.

You need to know the difference between faith and works because you need to know *who* to impress and *how*. When your audience is anyone and everyone on social media, the competition is always on—which means you always must be on. If you're not, your followers won't notice you anymore. When your audience is God, however, the contest is over. You've won—not because you're a great performer, but because Jesus carries you across the finish line and shares his success with you.

## WORKS

The Scriptures often treat faith and works as opposites. Whereas works of the law don't lead to divine approval, faith in Jesus does (Gal. 2:15–16). Here's why: Works are connected to law, and law is a double-edged sword (Gal. 3:10, 12). Though blessings come by meeting its demands, curses come by failing to do so (Deut. 28:1–2; 27:26).

Think of works as one way of preserving a relationship. An influencer, for example, agrees to update his feed regularly so his followers can like and share it. There's an exchange

at the center of this relationship—posts for likes and more publicity. When celebrities publicly thank their fans for their support, they're receiving a blessing for keeping their end of the bargain. But we've all seen what happens when a star loses his fandom. This relationship quickly shifts from blessing to cursing, sometimes all too literally.

The Scriptures don't want you to build your relationship with God in this way. Since your good performance can only be maintained for so long, you'll wind up doing perception management rather than walking with God. You'll give him the Instagram version of yourself—desperate to capture your high moments and determined to hide your low ones—even though you know it's inauthentic. In the end, filtering your life through works is a never-ending attempt to impress yourself, others, and sometimes God.

The alternative to this is faith. Instead of presenting your best self to trade your top performance for God's approval, faith looks to another to find acceptance. That other is Jesus, the one who lived and died so you would belong to God.

## FAITH

Whereas works is connected to law and performance, faith is connected to promise (Rom. 10:17). The leading model for this is Abraham. He left his land and family of origin because God promised him a new home where his descendants would increase and flourish under divine blessing (Gen. 12:1–3, 13:14–17). After years of wandering and childlessness, however, Abraham began to wonder if God would keep his word (Gen. 15:2–3, 8). God assured him by not only restating his commitment (Gen. 15:4–5, 7), but also by performing a ceremony that pledged his faithfulness under the threat of his own death (Gen. 15:9–21).

This is the turning point of Abraham's life. When he

trusts God will do what he's said, his story becomes the pattern for faith (Rom. 4:3, 18, 22; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23). There's not an exchange at the center of this relationship, but a promise. God will do something *for* Abraham. Abraham just has to receive God's gift with the open hands of faith.

Faith is beautiful because it levels the religious playing field. If acceptance comes through works, then some Christians would be better than others because some achievements just deserve more credit. But everyone who trusts in Jesus receives his standing as their own (Rom. 3:21–22; Phil. 3:9). Which means there's no room for second-rate Christians because we're equal in the risen Jesus (Rom. 3:27; Gal. 3:28).

Faith not only deflates your ego, but it also turns your need to impress upside down. What matters more is being impressed by the faithfulness of Jesus because he's the one who fulfills all of God's promises (2 Cor. 1:20). Even though he was the complete promise-keeper, he suffered the law's curse as if he was a promise-breaker (Gal. 3:13). But he did it for you, so that his cursing might be transformed into your blessing (Gal. 3:14).

Faith is about resting and receiving the faithfulness of Jesus as your own, his life for yours. When you set aside your resume and open yourself to this gift, you become a living art piece that walks in the good works God has designed for you (Eph. 2:8–10).

## LEANING INTO FAITH

I don't know about you, but I want to be successful. I want to be known. I want to be remembered. But I don't want to have that by being "on" all the time or by repeating a great performance. I can't do it for long. I start feeling empty when I'm not noticed anymore. If I have to prove myself to the world and to God all the time, I'll only prove that I'm not worth it.

Faith offers you true freedom by inviting you to rest in the accomplishments of Jesus. When you trust in his loyal obedience as your own, you're hidden from the criticisms of others (Col. 3:3). You are known by him and his opinion about you never changes (Gal. 4:9). Your worth is secure because his affirmation is final.



# Hidden and Revealed

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**BIOGRAPHIES ARE ONE OF** my favorite genres to read. You not only get to witness the transformation of someone who will one day change the world, but their experiences also help you reimagine what is possible. You might even feel like you've made a new friend along the way because their story has shaped you. And yet, this person will always be a stranger to you. Since you've never actually met them, there's still so much about them you just won't know.

There's a similar kind of suspense in knowing God—he's both a stranger and a friend. Though you feel his presence listening to the Scriptures, deep in prayer, or in the friendships of your faith community, he can feel distant when you need him the most. You can't always find him, but he always seems to find you.

In theology, this is known as the hidden and revealed God. If you ever feel like God is a stranger, then this article is for you. God *is* hidden, but that's only because he wants to be found in the right places. His identity is first fully revealed in his autobiography, the Scriptures. Then he shows up in the incarnation of his Son, the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth, to confirm what that story says about him. In the end, encountering Jesus means being found by the hidden God.

## HIDDEN

God is hidden in at least three ways. First, he's hidden because some aspects of his character are simply beyond our grasp. The poet of Psalm 145 reminds us of this when he says God's greatness is to be praised, and that his greatness is unsearchable (Ps. 145:3). It's as if God exists in a different yet overlapping dimension than us. We simultaneously worship his greatness while lacking the ability to appreciate all of its depth. Though his knowledge and

power break into our world and change it, the evidence he leaves behind isn't always easy to decipher (Isa. 40:28; Ps. 147:5). This is why the prophet Isaiah concludes God's ways are simply higher than human ways (Isa. 55:8-9).

We can't find God because he exists on a different level than we do, but our moral failures also push God even farther away. Again, the prophet Isaiah makes this clear. He says our "iniquities" separate us from God, stop him from listening to our prayers, and even cause him to turn his face away from our cares and concerns (Isa. 59:2). It's not just that we're unable to know God, it's that sin actively disrupts the divine connection between us. The apostle John puts it this way: We love the darkness and hate the light because we don't want our wrongs to be exposed (John 3:19-20). God doesn't hide because he doesn't want to be found. He's hidden because we'd rather be blind to him than admit our faults.

Thankfully, there's a third way in which God hides. Since we'd run from his divine light, God disguised himself in human camouflage to bring us back into his presence. In other words, God hides in his acts of redeeming love for his people. When the Israelites are released from exile under Cyrus's decree, the prophet Isaiah once again detects divine fingerprints at work (Ezra 1:1-11). He rejoices in God for hiding himself *in* these events (Isa. 45:15). By the time we start reading the New Testament, the God who hides in Israel's history shows up personally in Jesus of Nazareth. That's when the hidden God comes becomes the revealed God.

## REVEALED

Jesus reveals the hidden God in at least three ways. First, he reveals God by doing what God does. After Jesus is accused of violating divine commands for healing a man

on a Sabbath, his only defense is that his actions mirror God's actions (John 5:19). Not only does Jesus uniquely see what God is doing, but he is *shown* what to do by his Father (John 5:20). In other words, God chooses to be known through Jesus. This is why Jesus will eventually say to Philip, a skeptic, that to see him *is* to see the Father (John 14:9). Jesus is like a divine mirror you look through to find God.

Not only does Jesus do what God does, but his words also echo the voice of God. Even though he is God's trusted representative, Jesus's teachings about God are often misunderstood (John 8:27). Only after he is lifted up on the cross will his teachings be received as a divine word (John 8:28), not because he's a prophet, but because God has taught him what to say. This isn't a divine whisper Jesus heard in his sleep. They are the lessons he has learned while in God's presence (John 8:38). Listening to Jesus is hearing the voice of God.

On the night of his betrayal, Jesus doesn't leave behind God's words or even God's actions as divine reflections. He raises the stakes by claiming he *embodies* the Father. Jesus isn't just a mirror you look through to find God—he is God enfleshed. Or, in his words, everyone who sees Jesus has seen the living God because he is in the Father and the Father is in him (John 14: 7, 9-11). The apostle

John said as much when he began his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Jesus makes the hidden God revealed because he is God.

## FINDING THE HIDDEN & REVEALED GOD

God is a stranger because he's a divine being who's always beyond our grasp. He can also be even more distant because we're the kind of beings who embrace the darkness and resist his light. Together, these things make God feel impossibly hidden. At the same time, God has done everything possible to turn himself into a friend. He sent Jesus to speak, act, and even embody the Father's will. All of this proves God wants to be known through Jesus.

If you want to find the hidden God, then I invite you to read the Scriptures. Every story there will lead you to Jesus (Luke 24:27). Encountering the risen Jesus will give you full and complete access to God (Matt. 11:27). You will also be given a new identity, named a son or daughter of the crucified yet risen king (2 Cor. 6:18). And you will not just know, but be known by God himself (Gal. 4:9). In the end, finding the hidden God means being found by the God revealed in Jesus.

