

God is God

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight I'd like us to begin a new series that we're going to be looking at across our evenings, which we're also going to be doing a Bible study on in our midweek meetings over the next month or two.

One of the realities that we face in the Christian church is that there's lots and lots of different things that we have different opinions on. So you look all across the Christian church, you'll see people have got different opinions on things like baptism. Is it for believers only?

Is it for believers and their children? People have different opinions about communion. How frequently we should have it, once a week, once a month, once every few months. What we should sing in worship, exegesis of Samadhi, inclusive Samadhi. What Bible version we should use. Things like these. Christians have lots of different opinions on these. You see that all over the Christian church worldwide. Even in our own congregation there's lots and lots of different viewpoints. And that's totally okay. It's actually normal. That's something that's always going to be the case. And the key thing is just to ensure that we listen well to one another and also that we think carefully about our own views to make sure that they have a scriptural basis.

But for this series that we're going to look at together, I want us to focus on something that I know every single one of us agrees on. There's something that every single one of us wants.

What we all want is to see people come to faith in Jesus. That's the great mission that unites the whole of the Christian church. And that's something that we can all work towards together.

[2 : 1 0] That's why God has placed us here as his ambassador to reach out with the gospel. But I'm sure every single one of us also agrees that that task can seem daunting. Sometimes it can even seem overwhelming.

In terms of evangelism, it's a responsibility that we all have. And yet it's a duty that that all of us, I'm sure, struggle with one way or another. But I hope that this series is going to help us with this. And its title is Doctrine for Mission. Now, I hope that makes sense to you.

The reason I've called it that is that we're going to be looking at some key theological truths, some doctrines that the Bible sets before us. And we're going to see how these help us to reach out with the gospel to the community around us. We want what we believe our doctrine to empower us for mission. And what I hope we'll discover is that that's exactly what happens, that when you look at the great truths that the Bible gives us, it empowers us and encourages us so much as we seek to reach out to the community around us with the good news of Jesus.

So tonight, we're going to begin in Exodus chapter three, and I'm going to read again verses 13 and 14. Then Moses said to God, If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they asked me, What is his name? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. And he said, Say this to the people of Israel. I am, has sent me to you. Sharing our faith and reaching out to people around us is something that nearly every Christian finds difficult. I think every Christian I know finds it difficult. If you feel like you are terrible at it, then I know exactly how you feel and you know exactly how I feel.

Please don't think that that ministers find that easy. We don't. We struggle with it as well. Jesus said that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Often we feel like adding a little bit more to that and saying, Yes, and the laborers are also awful at their jobs. And most of the time they feel a bit terrified. Because we feel like that, often we can just give up, resigning ourselves to having to live with feeling of guilt and failure that, you know, we're not reaching out to people in the way that we should. Sometimes we try to get better at it.

[5 : 14] And so to do that, we can understand and learn things that will help us improve in terms of sharing our faith. And there's nothing wrong with that. That's actually a great thing to do. We want to learn how we can start good conversations, how to listen well, how to build up relationships.

All of these things are crucial. But before we learn any of that practical stuff, I think there's an even bigger lesson that we need to learn or maybe to relearn. When it comes to sharing our faith, the single most important thing that we need to know is that God is God. God is God. That's the foundational truth of all Christian theology. When we say that God is something, what we're trying to do is describe the nature of God. So you think about the nature of something, nature of a human, nature of a tree, nature of a cell or whatever it may be, you're talking about what that thing is. So when we're talking about what God is, we're talking about his nature, but it's not easy to do that because God is in a category all of his own. Nothing else has his nature. Nothing else is in his category. And that's why when we talk about what God is, we need to use big language, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible. These are the kind of words that we have to use. God is almighty. He's most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute.

He's as big and as glorious and as majestic and as loving as it is possible to be. That's why it takes the entire universe to declare his glory. That's why learning about him never gets boring.

That's why he's worthy of a worship forever. The foundational truth of all Christian theology is that God is God. But it's also the foundational truth of all Christian evangelism. And the reason we need to learn that or relearn that is because of the heart of our feelings of fear or worry or inadequacy about sharing our faith can be a whole set of niggles and doubts that are telling us that God is a whole lot of other things. So when it comes to reaching out to Scotland today with the Gospel, it's so easy to think that God is weak. Maybe like a politician that nobody really wants to vote for anymore or a high-street shop that's going through that slow, painful process of going out of business. If you look at the population of Scotland today, it looks like Christianity is losing the battle in terms of numbers. It looks like the task of evangelism is becoming more and more impossible. And even if you pick a friend or a family member, you look at them and you think even one person seems like a monumental task. How are they going to change? How are they going to listen? How do you even bring God into the conversation at all? The hurdles look huge.

And at that moment, it's so easy for our evangelistic fire to be quenched by a flood of niggles telling us that God is weak. Or we can think that God is distant. So maybe in generations, God gone by, God did amazing things. But those days are history. It's so easy to think that things were different then, things were better then. And God's just not so interested now. And even if we do pluck up our courage to share our faith, it can feel as though God's a million miles from that conversation, that we're just stumbling along on our own, getting our words muddled up. And so that God actually did hear what was going on, he would probably roll his eyes because we're not doing a particularly good job. It's so easy to think that God is distant. And maybe if we're completely honest, when we're faced with speaking to people about God, we can even fall into the trap of thinking that God's maybe even a bit irrelevant, maybe even a bit embarrassing. We think, I don't know if we can talk about God. Talking about God seems a bit unintellectual, a bit odd, maybe even a bit boring. Whatever God is, it's all too easy to think that he's not something that we feel very comfortable talking about. And I find, I asked myself this question, if I was to walk into somebody's house here and ask yourself the same question, would you find it easier to talk about football or to talk about God? I would find it easier to talk about football. Now, for those of you who hate football, please just pick an equivalent thing that you do like. Sometimes it's hard because we just feel awkward about it. Maybe this is a terrible illustration, but sharing your faith can sometimes feel a bit like a tip to the dentist. Now, I hate the dentist, like I'm sure most of you do. If you think about the dentist, if anything substantial is going to happen, then it's unlikely to be a pleasant process. And it can feel a bit like that when it comes to sharing your faith as well. The result of all these kind of feelings is that our efforts at evangelism can be paralysed by the suspicion that God is weak, that he's distant, or that he's irrelevant.

[11 : 30] Is that really what God is like? No. All of that is what God is not, because God is actually God.

And that's the truth that we have got to write upon our hearts. It's the truth that runs right through the Bible, that runs right through Christian theology and right through the history of God's mission through his church. God's not weak, he's not distant, he's not irrelevant. In fact, if God is God, then it is impossible for him to be any of these things. The source of all strength, energy, movement and life cannot be weak. The sustainer of every part of the universe who knows every detail of every person cannot be distant. And the absolute of all reality from whom and to whom everything exists and to whom everyone must give an account, that absolute can never, ever be irrelevant. If your evangelism is crippled by the feelings that God is incapable or absent or obscured, then you can happily retire from having those feelings. God is none of those things.

God is God. And one of the best places to see this is in the life of Moses. In Exodus chapter 3, God appears to Moses who for the past 40 years has been a shepherd in more or less the middle of nowhere. God speaks to him from a burning bush and he tells Moses that he's going to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom. And understandably, Moses is daunted by the task. And among as many fears is the question of how the Israelites with whom he hasn't lived for four decades are going to react to him. So he says to God, if I come to the people of Israel and say to them, the God of your father has sent me to you. If they ask me what's his name, what should I say? And God gives an outstanding reply. He says to Moses, I am who I am. Say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you. God is who he is. Now that's simultaneously the simplest and the most profound theological statement that can ever be made. This is the foundational truth of all our theology. And it's just amazing that such a small, simple statement, such tiny words can express the most monumental and profound truths. God is who he is. God is God.

And among the many things that that tells us, these simple words show us that God is unique. There's none other. They reveal the personalness of God. He's got certain qualities, certain characteristics, certain attributes. They show the consistency of God. He is always through to his own character. And they reinforce the perfection of God. He always has been and always will be everything that he is meant to be. The thing that Moses and the Israelites needed to know more than anything else is that God is God. And when it comes to sharing our faith, that's exactly what we need to know as well. There's loads that we could say about this.

What I want to do though is highlight four truths about God that are revealed to us in the rest of Moses' story. There's a wealth of theological riches in the book of Exodus. I'm just going to pick out four truths, four truths that are awesome, awesome in the truest sense of the word. Number one, God is sovereign. So right through the narrative of the Exodus, from the moment God shows that he knows the circumstances that Moses and the Israelites are in, all the way through to when God demonstrates that he, and not the mighty Egyptian Pharaoh, he is the one who is really in control. God is the one who reigns over every person, every place, every moment. God is sovereign. Number two, God takes the initiative. He is the one who comes to Moses. He's the one who initiates the work of salvation. It all starts from him. The day that the bush burned began has a very ordinary day for

[16 : 39] Moses. He was just looking after his sheep. He wasn't looking for a revelation from God. It was just another day as a shepherd in the wilderness. God takes the initiative and from that moment everything changes. Number three, God is powerful. He has all the resources he needs to accomplish his plans.

That is seen right before Moses at this moment because the bush is burning, but it's not being consumed. The energy is not drying out. You all go home just now and put a fire on. You can shove a pile of peat on. You've got wonderful energy, but after a few hours it'll die down. The power will run out, never with God. His resources never run out. And in the dramatic departure from slavery later in Exodus, the people of Israel and the Egyptians are left in absolutely no doubt that God is incredibly powerful. And then number four, God is compassionate. He's heard the cry of the Israelite slaves. He's seen their suffering. He's remembered his covenant promises and he's ready and willing to help. God is sovereign. God takes the initiative. God is powerful.

God is compassionate. So when God says, I am who I am, that's the kind of thing that he means. And we stand before him in awe. So these are four awesome truths about God, but they are also four incredibly helpful truths for us to remember in terms of sharing our faith and engaging in mission.

And it's crucial that we remember them because they could not be more relevant to us as we seek to evangelise. So God is sovereign. That means that every single time you speak about your faith with someone, you are doing that under the authority and reign of God. He is the one who's in control.

He knows you. He knows the person that you're talking to. And there is never a moment when your efforts at evangelism are out of his reach as you seek to share your faith with your friend, as you invite them to church or invite them to dinner or meet with them or pray with them, as you do that, the sovereign hand of God is on your shoulder. He's sovereign, which means he's got your back. God takes the initiative. Therefore, every time you share your faith, you're not starting anything. You're getting involved in something that God has already begun. You didn't start it.

[19 : 49] He did. You go, but it's only because he is sending you. You are there because that's where he's put you. The whole reason you've got a message is because he has given you something to say.

So when you try to talk about Jesus, you don't need to look over your shoulder thinking, oh, I wonder if God is going to come with me in this conversation. He is already there.

He's already one step ahead. He takes the initiative. God is powerful. So every time you talk about Jesus, your words are backed up by the inexhaustible power of God. Forgive me if you've heard me use this illustration before because I have used it before, but I want you to think about the electricity supply in your home. Think about your living room or your bedroom. There's tons of sockets on the wall. We use these to plug in our phone chargers, our TVs, our hair dryers, dozens of other things. These wee white sockets on our wall don't look like very much, do they? They're not a particularly exciting part of life.

Many of you have built a house or bought a new house and you're taking some friends to show them around. I do it very much. You say, now look at these sockets, aren't they amazing? They're very, very much in the background. But the truth is a socket on the wall is an incredible source of power because the sockets on your wall are connected to a ring main. That ring main is connected to your fuse box. That fuse box is connected to an electricity supply cable. And unless you live somewhere very, very remote, that supply cable is connected to the national grid. And that means that the wee socket on your bedroom wall has got the power of every power station, every wind farm, every hydroelectric dam, every solar power farm on the national grid connected to it. That is a colossal amount of power. That's why if you try to empty all the electricity out of that socket, you're going to be there for a long, long, long time. And that is a picture of what you are like as you share your faith. You might feel as tiny and as insignificant as that white socket on the wall, but you are connected to the God whose power is phenomenal and which will never, ever run dry.

And God is compassionate. So every time you seek to evangelize, you're demonstrating the extraordinary mercy, grace and love of God. You're reaching out on His behalf. You're speaking to somebody who God deeply cares about. And the love that you show is only going to just be a glimpse of the love that they are going to discover if they follow Jesus for themselves. Now, all of these four truths are helping us when it comes to sharing our faith, but the key point is that none of them are grounded on who we are. They're all grounded on who God is.

[23 : 26] And it's vital for us to recognize this because when it comes to sharing our faith, when it comes to reaching out to the community around us, when it comes to seeing a new generation of believers coming into the churches in Carlisle, there's a lot of things that we need. And that's part of the reason why evangelism can seem so overwhelming and intimidating because we need opportunities to arise. We need energy for the task. We need hurdles to be taken down. We need people's eyes to be open. We need a message that will actually change lives. We need power that goes beyond anything that human effort is ever capable of. Do we have all of that? Well, on our own we don't, but God most definitely does have it because God is God.

So is God strong enough to use weak, stammering people like you? Is God able to open the eyes and soften the hearts of your friends, your neighbors, your colleagues, the people in your family? Is God going to keep his promise to build his church?

Can the Holy Spirit empower people like you to bear witness for Jesus this week? Is God sovereign enough to overcome opposition? Is God able to do even more than we can ask or think? Of course he is. Why? Because God is God. He's not just a force or a philosophy or a lifestyle movement or a guru or an ideology. He is God. He's bigger, stronger, wiser, more powerful, more compassionate, more capable, more gracious and more loving than anything else in all existence.

And of course that also means that we are not God. So we're not able, we're not capable and nor do we need to be. Our weakness doesn't matter because God is God. And to prove that you only need to look at the history of the church. We look at evangelism today and it seems like it's nearly an impossible task. And yet God has been doing amazing things for centuries.

You look back at the times of great revival in the past. You look at times when the church grew in amazing ways. One thing was common in all these places. Everything looked bleak.

[26 : 25] And then God did amazing things. Every generation of the church begins with nothing.

And yet God always brings people to faith. History shows so clearly that when it comes to evangelism, God is God.

You only have to see it in your own life. You only have to look at your own life to see it. Because for every single one of us who's a Christian here today, if I ask you, in terms of you becoming a Christian, who did it? Would you say me? No. You'd say God did it.

And so as you think of every person around you that you long to see coming to faith, can God do it again? Too right he can. Because God is God.

So this truth, this doctrine that God is God is vital to remember because it's a huge help for us as we seek to void admission and to share our faith. And I just want to close by saying that there's four things that it should give us. It should give us confidence. God is willing. He's able. He is sovereign. He's already worked in the lives of millions and millions of people.

[27 : 59] And he has no intention of stopping. So can God work in the life of your friend, your neighbour, your colleague, your family? Can God work in the life of the person that you've prayed for, for years and years and years? Of course he can. It's impossible for the answer to that question to be no. It's impossible. And on top of that, it's reminding us that the fact that God is God means that every day something amazing might happen. If you look again at Exodus 3, at the start of the chapter, Moses was just looking after the sheep. By the end of the chapter, history had changed forever. As we get up tomorrow morning, just think of all that God could do by the time we go to bed again. So it should give us confidence, not in ourselves, but in God. It should give us a sense of dependence. As we seek to share our faith with others, we do that in complete dependence on the God who alone is God. So if you see your friend, I think to yourself, I could never have an impact on their life. Then you're absolutely right because you can't. But God can. And so if you look at the community around us and think, you know, we're not making much progress, these are quiet days, that's not a problem for God. It's not a problem for God. And that's why in the Great

Commission, when Jesus said, go, he also said, I'm coming with you. God is God. So we go out with the gospel and we do so in total dependence on him. We're not strong enough. We're not capable enough. We're not brave enough. We're not powerful enough. We're not smart enough. We're nowhere near sufficient. But God is because God is God and he's with you. And it's his work that you're doing.

It should also motivate us to obedience. That word obedience raises two very important points. First of all, sometimes, you know, we can slip into the trap of thinking that dependence on God means that, you know, we can't really do anything. Therefore, we shouldn't really do anything. We should just simply wait for God. And it's easy to see why people would think like that. And it can seem as though, you know, it's recognizing that we're just dependent on God.

We should just wait. But it's not a biblical approach to think like that. Because fundamentally, reaching out with the gospel is a command that God has given us. It's a command that we must obey.

And one of the founding members of the free church and founding ministers who went on to become principal of New College was called William Cunningham. And he was having to deal with all of this with people saying, you know, we shouldn't go out with the gospel or we shouldn't do this stuff.

[31 : 16] You know, we should just we should limit who we tell things to. We should, you know, we shouldn't jump ahead of God. He had to deal with that. And he said, the only way you can adopt that opinion is to embrace the principle of refusing to obey the command of God. In other words, he said, you just you can't do that. God has said, go. So we must obey. And it's reminding us that witnessing is not jumping ahead of God. It's not jumping ahead of the God who's sovereign. Witnessing is an act of obedience to the God who is sovereign. In other words, first of all, we don't evangelize because we think we can convert people. We do it because God has said, do it. And there can never be a part of our lives where we feel that we have the right to disobey him.

Now, that doesn't mean that any of it comes through our efforts. Any fruit that arises from evangelism is entirely the work of God, the Holy Spirit in and through us. But whether the harvest is great or small is not our primary concern. Our primary concern is to obey the command that God has given to us. But the word obedience is also important because it doesn't just tell us a bit why we evangelize. It also helps to show us how we evangelize. Because at the heart of our Christian witness in the week that's coming up is a daily commitment to think and speak and behave in a way that shows that we're following Jesus. We strive to obey him because by keeping his commandments, all those around us will know that we are his disciples. So it should give us confidence, it should give us dependence, it should motivate us to obedience. Finally, it should remind us to never, ever, ever give up. If evangelizing is one of the hardest parts of being a Christian, giving up on evangelizing is one of the easiest. Even if we do finally pluck up the courage to invite someone to church or to speak to them or to tie in probe more and build up a gospel conversation with them, sometimes they can look as though nothing is happening. When we see little results we can so easily be discouraged and succumb to the temptation to abandon the task.

But if God is God then there is never, ever a reason to give up. I'm not going to make you raise your hands but I bet you if I ask the question is there anybody in here that once looked like a lost cause in terms of faith in Jesus Christ? I bet there's some of you who put your hand up.

You are a testimony to the fact that we should never, ever give up. Because every single person who's ever become a Christian was once spiritually blind, deaf, distracted, possibly not even aware that they had a problem. And that applies whether you convert it as a young child, convert it as an old man, whatever, old man or woman, whatever it may be, we all start off lost and then God comes on the scene. So if you are surrounded at work or in your family or in your community by people who seem deaf or blind or distracted who probably don't even have a clue about the danger that they're in, who don't for one minute seem to think that they need Jesus then do not give up. Because God is God and every single one of these people is an opportunity for God to show you that again. And when you hear about someone talk about when they became a

Christian, one of the wonderful things that you discover is that for almost all of us our journey to faith involves many different people, many different sermons, many different conversations.

[35 : 40] Most of the time the people involved weren't even aware of the contribution that they made and yet all the time the God who is actually God has been working everything together to bring another precious child into his family. So when it comes to sharing your faith, when it comes to our mission as disciples of Jesus, it's normal to feel weak. It's okay to feel daunted. It's very likely that you'll feel inadequate. But in the midst of all of that, never ever forget that God is God. We can so easily be discouraged by thinking that the nation is too dark, the church is too weak, the challenge is too great, people's hearts are too hard, the situation is too bleak and we are too useless. But none of that is true. In fact all of that is theological nonsense.

Because God is God. The last thing I'm going to say is this. Anyone here tonight or watching at home is not yet a Christian.

God has brought you here to tell you that he wants you, that he loves you, that he sent his son to save you. And the fact that you can be certain that he's done that is because he's God.

Everything is in his hands. He's brought you here because this is what he wants you to know. Amen. Let's pray.

Amen. God Almighty, we bow before you because you are God.

[38 : 13] May that truth be written on our hearts. May that truth encourage and help us as we seek to reach out to the gospel with the gospel this week. And please Father, please you are God.

So please bring people to faith as you have promised. Amen.