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PART ONE

# Did Jesus have grandparents?

and other questions about  
God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit

## 1. Is God really a person?

Not in precisely the same way that we are persons. We are just human beings. Nevertheless, God has personality and is, in that sense, a person. At the burning bush, He told Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). God also told Moses to tell the people of Israel, “The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation” (Ex. 3:15). *All* the names given to God in Scripture denote personality. Furthermore, the Bible uses personal pronouns with respect to God, as in John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

The Bible ascribes attributes of personality (or personhood) to God. God grieves (Gen. 6:6), He loves (Rev. 3:19), etc. Thus, the testimony of the Bible is that God is indeed a person.

—D. C.

## 2. What is the image of God in mankind? How do you get it, and can you lose it?

Every person is born with the image of God, and you cannot lose it. So what is this image of God?

The dictionary defines an image as “the reproduction or imitation of the form of a thing or a person.” Mankind, as made in the image of God, is intended to resemble God, though not physically, of course. God is spirit, not material (John 4:24). Nobody has ever looked like God.

Genesis 1:26–31 and 2:7–25 reveal that God created man

in His own image, and that Eve was not an afterthought as she was also a creature made in God's image. The first stage of Adam's creation was shaping the man from clay. Second, God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the clay came to life as a living being. The clay model did not become merely an intelligent animal; he became the bearer of the image of God.

This means that he resembled his Creator. The least that can be said about the Creator is that He is a person: He thinks, He feels, and He acts. In other words, He has intellect and emotion, and the ability to act in accordance with those properties. Theologians and other thinkers draw up lists of properties that define the image of God, including self-consciousness, self-transcendence, self-determination, the power of abstract thought, freedom of will (as contrasted with animal instinct), awareness of God and communion with Him, and the hope of eternal life.

The image of God was not lost when Adam sinned, but it was badly defaced. (See the following texts: Gen. 9:6; Acts 17:28; and James 3:9.) All of us are spiritually damaged. The only human being in history in whom the image of God was unblemished was Jesus. But, through the redemption that is in Him, the image of God is being restored to its pristine state in everyone who submits to Him in repentance and faith. The process begins with the new birth and continues until we reach our heavenly home (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:24).

—D. C.

### **3. A friend, based on Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15, says that Jesus could have sinned but did not. Is he right?**

He is half-right: Jesus did not sin. The unanswered question, then, is could He have sinned? The answer is an emphatic no! He was impeccable, meaning that He was not able to sin. True, Hebrews 4:15 says He was “tempted in every way, just as we are,” but in the Greek text, the words that follow, “yet he did not sin,” lack a verb and should be translated, “apart from sin.” Able not to sin, as some say, was not the case; He was not able to sin.

For those who insist that the words, “in every way,” mean exactly that, and no less, consider 1 Corinthians 15:27: “Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself.” Everything or every way does not always mean, “with no exception whatsoever.”

The temptations that trouble us sinners most persistently depend on our sinful nature. Jesus did not have a sinful nature. He was incapable of any of the acts (or impulses) of the sinful nature listed in Galatians 5:19–21. Hebrews 6:18 says, “It is impossible for God to lie.” Transfer that affirmation to Jesus, and we can conclude that it was impossible for Him to sin. That was the uniform testimony of three preeminent apostles—Peter, Paul, and John: “[Jesus] committed no sin” (1 Peter 2:22); “him who had no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21); and “in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5).

The value of Christ’s death on our behalf depends on who He was. True, He embraced perfect humanity; He became a human being. He was like us, except that He did not have a

sinful nature. He became human, but He did not cease to be the Son of God. As a perfect human being—if that were all He was—He could not have died vicariously for the sins of the world. He was the Lamb of God, to be sure—“without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19)—but He was more than that. He was the Son of God, sinless and impeccable in all His parts.

—D. C.

#### **4. Muslims admit that Jesus was a great prophet, but they say Muhammad, coming later, was greater. Which of the two was the greater?**

You ask the wrong question. It might be possible to compare and contrast Muhammad with a prophet like Elijah or Amos. But it is impossible to compare him with Christ, because Christ was not a mere man. When, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter tried to put Moses and Elijah on the same level as Jesus, a cloud enveloped them and a terrifying voice spoke from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matt. 17:5). Jesus is God’s Son, not a mere prophet. But He also functioned as a prophet by being God’s ultimate spokesman (see Heb. 1:1–4). He revealed the mind of the Father in all that He said and did. And then He made atonement for sin. Muhammad could never compare to the person or work of our Lord Jesus.

—D. C.

## 5. What does Matthew mean by the phrase, “blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matt. 12:31)? Does this mean that there are some sins that cannot be forgiven? Can a believer ever commit this sin?

The discussion concerning the precise nature of this unforgivable sin is both extensive and controversial. Some in the early church thought that this sin was the denial of prophetic inspiration in general; others thought it was a form of post-conversion apostasy. Perhaps the most popular view is to equate the unforgivable sin with the rejection of the gospel. Those who refuse to embrace the forgiveness of sins offered through the cross have no other recourse for the atonement of their transgressions. In this interpretation, the unforgivable sin is the sin of unbelief, which John seems to affirm in 3:18 and 16:9 and also 1 John 5:16.

While this is a possible interpretation, it does not seem to fit within the context of Matthew 12. In this passage, the Pharisees have attributed the energizing force behind Jesus' miraculous healing to the prince of demons, Satan. They are not persuaded by the testimony and work of Jesus. They want to be a stumbling block to anyone else who might consider becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. Right after the miraculous healing, verse 23 says that all the people were astonished and wondered if Jesus was indeed the Son of David. At this point the Pharisees, in an attempt to dissuade them, say that Jesus is a pawn of Satan.

The “blasphemy against the Spirit” describes a heart that

is so hardened that it not only refuses to see the divine in the work of Christ, but it also actively prevents others from coming to Him. This interpretation fits the context. Those who oppose Jesus seek to scatter the Jews rather than gather them up into the kingdom of God (v. 30). Even in the presence of one of the great miracles in the Gospels—the healing of a demon-possessed, blind, and mute man—the hearts of the Pharisees were unmoved. These religious leaders had closed their hearts to any testimony of the Spirit that affirms Jesus as the Great One sent from God. This is the unforgivable sin.

Other passages within the Bible affirm this interpretation. Deuteronomy speaks of the worship of idols (which may persuade others to do so) as a sin that will not be forgiven (29:18–20). Those who have caused a little one to stumble would be better off with a millstone hung around their neck and thrown into the sea (Matt. 18:6). And the book of Hebrews speaks of those who have experienced the testimony of the Spirit to some degree and then rejected it; how can they be brought back to repentance (6:6)?

Finally, can a believer commit this sin? Personally, I do not believe an individual who has genuinely confessed Jesus as Lord can publicly oppose the work of God in the world by attributing it to something evil. Pastorally, anyone who fears having committed this sin should not worry; an apostate would not even consider worrying about having committed this sin.

—D. R.

## 6. A good friend says anger is okay, that it is even okay to be mad at God. Is he right?

Less than half right. Most of the Bible's references to anger are negative, and sometimes silly. Jonah was angry because God didn't destroy Nineveh. The prodigal son's brother was angry because their father celebrated the return of the prodigal. Jonah's anger would have been understandable if directed at, say, a conquering Israelite general. But he was angry at God, and to be angry at God is to be ridiculous as well as sinful. The older brother sounded like a petulant child; he made a fool of himself.

Anger need not always be sinful. Sometimes, as when a sex offender abuses a child, or when an elected official steals public funds, anger is appropriate. A ho-hum response to such crimes would be inexcusable. However, Paul warns us, "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26), and, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger" (Eph. 4:31). We probably justify anger that is really intolerable. As James observes, "human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:20).

Two additional considerations: first, more than one word in the original languages is rendered "anger." They are not entirely synonymous. Hence, a word study would be useful. Second, some of the writers of the Psalms were sorely distressed because of God's *apparent* indifference to their plight, and they may *seem* to us to have been angry. But they were never angry at God. After registering bewilderment in the face of social injustice and other anomalies, they ended their psalms with expressions of faith in God, and praise. They remembered that God is God. So should we.

—D. C.

## 7. If John's gospel did not use the term *Trinity*, why should we use the term? I just cannot understand: if there is but one God, how can He be made of three coequal persons working in unity? Doesn't one mean singular?

This is probably the most frequently asked and the most difficult question one can pose concerning the Christian faith. Yet it is so central to our faith that legions of theologians and philosophers have dared to tread these sacred grounds. Any response, especially in this limited format, will be incomplete and may be unsatisfying.

Let me begin by noting that while the term Trinity is not explicitly found in the Scriptures, the concept surely is. This doctrine is composed of three basic beliefs: (1) there is one God; (2) the Father is God; Jesus is God; and the Holy Spirit is God; and (3) all three divine persons are distinct.

As you have correctly noted, this presents the Christian with a dilemma. Either there is one God, and therefore, only one divine person; or, there are three divine persons, and therefore, three gods. But orthodox Christianity rejects both of these options as being heretical.

One route is to argue that there is one divine essence, which is constituted by three distinct persons, each identical to that divine essence. The oneness of the Trinity would refer to this divine essence. The threeness would refer to each of the divine persons, who simply are that one divine essence. This way of viewing things raises the issue of counting. How can there be only one essence when there are three divine persons

identical to that one essence? That's like saying one equals three.

But one could argue that God transcends the human sphere in such a way that our concepts like “essence” or “person” cannot capture the rich details of the divine sphere. Think of it this way. A drawing by definition cannot be both a circle and a triangle. This is the case because one’s perspective is that of a flat plane—two-dimensional. But if we expand our world into three dimensions, then we could have an object, such as a cone, which could be seen as a triangle from one perspective and a circle from a different perspective. It is the two-dimensional world’s inability to capture the three-dimensional nature of the cone that produces this logical problem. Applying this to the issue at hand, our human concepts are like two-dimensional drawings trying to capture the reality of a three-dimensional divine Being.

The other route one can go is to argue that when we say there is one God, we mean that there is one “Godhead”—one divine society or family. In this case the Father, Son, and Spirit are members of the same divine family. The problem facing this particular model is whether the belief in one “Godhead” is as monotheistic as the belief in “one God.” This understanding of the Trinity seems to position Christianity dangerously close to polytheism. But at the same time, its advantage is in its logical clarity. The oneness of the Trinity references the Godhead; the threeness references the Father, Son, and Spirit, who are members of that one divine family.

Different orthodox Christian theologians and philosophers support both of these interpretations. Those who desire to affirm a strong sense of monotheism tend to opt for the first model presented. Those who believe that conceptual precision

is absolutely necessary in the formulation of our doctrines tend to opt for the second.

No matter where our disagreements may be concerning this most complex but crucial doctrine, we cannot forget that the triune nature of God is another way of saying what John has written in his first epistle: “God is love.” From all of eternity, the Christian God is one whose essence is love, a selfless love of one person for another; a love so pure that it can only be pictured by the love of a parent for their only child.

—D. R.

## 8. I'm eleven years old, and I want to know why God made us if He knew that we would be sinners.

I'm eighty years old, and I often ponder the question. Many Bible students believe the answer follows three lines: First, God is love. Second, He seems to have wanted a bigger or better object of His love than angels. Third, He saw past Adam's sin and ruin to a new heaven and earth populated by redeemed people. The world to come would more than compensate for the sorrows of the first earth and its inhabitants.

“For God so loved the world,” John 3:16 says, “that he gave his one and only Son.” For reasons we do not fully fathom, God loved the work of His hands. Maybe that is why He created: He loved the world even before His act of creation.

Isaiah 43:7 gives an additional hint: “Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.” And in Isaiah 43:21 God says that He created His people for Himself, for a specific purpose: “that they may proclaim my praise.”

It seems that God created us as an expression of His love and to receive our praise. Despite our sin, He has made a way for us to spend eternity with Him when the sin and sorrow of the past will be forgotten.

—D. C.

**9. What year was Jesus born? According to Matthew, Jesus was born before Herod the Great died (4 BC, see Matt. 2:1–23) and according to Luke, He was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria, a position Quirinius took up around AD 6–7 (see Luke 2:2).**

Matthew makes it clear that the Lord Jesus was born while Herod ruled. He died in 4 BC, so most Bible students surmise that the Lord Jesus was born a year or two earlier, sometime between 6 BC and early 4 BC. Matthew and Luke both place the birth of the Lord Jesus near the end of the reign of Herod. So the Lord Jesus was born sometime between 6 and 4 BC.

Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, records that Quirinius became governor after the Romans removed Herod's son, Archelaus, as king in AD 6, and he carried out a census (or registration) of his entire domain early in his governorship (see Luke 2:1–3). On the surface this appears to contradict Matthew's account. A good explanation is to translate Luke 2:2 in a slightly different way. The key word is *proton*, translated "first," as in "This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." When this word is used adverbially, it can mean "before." That's the way it was used in John 15:18,

when the Lord Jesus said that the world “hated me first.” Luke’s point was that the Lord Jesus was born during a census, requiring Joseph and Mary to travel to their familial town; but this census is not to be confused with the more well-known census conducted ten years later by Quirinius. Luke’s desire to be precise (see Luke 1:3–4) caused him to differentiate the census at the birth of Jesus from the later one.

—M. R.

**10. I am wondering if God (as distinct from Christ) has emotions. I have heard some pastors and theologians claim that God has no emotions. It is very hard for me to think about or feel close to a kind of robot God.**

Some time ago, a number of theologians did articulate a doctrine known as the “impassability of God” in which they contended that God was without what they called “passions.” One could suggest that this stems from a fear that God would be seen as unstable because He had emotions. I myself have heard this teaching in classrooms. Such an image of God as what philosophers call an “unmoved mover” with little connection to us as human beings is more a product of Greek philosophy’s emphasis on the dualism between flesh and spirit than on biblical teaching. Such a God becomes remote, the proverbial white-bearded “man in the sky” looking at us indifferently from the heavenly balcony.

I heard a fine sermon by Erwin Lutzer, pastor of The Moody Church, on this subject and was heartened again to hear that the answer was yes, God does have emotions; the evidence for

## DO ANGELS REALLY HAVE WINGS?

this is in Scripture. First of all, it is important to note that God's emotions are not identical to ours; God is not subject to the dark side of emotions or to instability. As John Calvin said, God "lisps" to us in language we can understand. So the Bible tells us that He loves (John 3:16), He is grieved (Gen. 6:6), He becomes angry (Deut. 1:37), He is filled with pity (Judg. 2:18), He has compassion (Ps. 103:13), and He rejoices over us (Isa. 62:5), to name only a few. In the words of the old hymn, "The love of God is greater far / than tongue or pen can ever tell; It goes beyond the highest star / and reaches to the lowest hell. . . . It shall forevermore endure / The saints' and angels' song."

—R. d.