

Triune

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much, Esther, and my name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here at Brunfield, and it's a real joy to be preaching on this wonderful topic this evening. We're in this series, This Is Our God, and this evening we're going to be thinking especially about our God as a triune God, one God, three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, Trinity in unity, triune. And I think that this is maybe one of those, you know, we all know it's true, and we pay lip service to it, but we try not to think about it too much. It gives us a bit of a headache, right? But it really is worth thinking about, and though it's tricky, it really is worth thinking about. Shall we pray before we begin, as it is a tough one? Heavenly Father, thank you so much for all that you have given us through your Son and by sending your Spirit. And I pray this evening, as we think a little bit about you and who you really are, that you would be with us by your

Spirit, helping us to understand and helping us to apply these wonderful truths to our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Let me begin with a story. It's a story about a rugby player. It's not about me, I promise, but I do think it's a true story. So it's a Saturday, Saturday, that's game day for rugby players, and the bus was leaving at 10 a.m. But this rugby player slept in, and he missed the bus. Doing some quick research, he realized that he could get a train and still get there in time. So he did that. He jumped on the train. He found a seat. It was a table seat, which is good.

We like a table seat. But then a couple of stops in, the train's getting pretty busy, and this really, really tall man comes and sits opposite him, like really tall. And it becomes very obvious quite quickly that this really tall man does not have enough room, and he's not happy about it. And then the food trolley comes along, and the rugby player, he orders himself a black coffee, get a bit of a pregame caffeine fix. And then he gets a phone call, and as he goes and twists to his pocket to pick up his phone, he knocks this cup of coffee, and it just goes all over this really tall man sitting opposite him. He's getting really annoyed now, you can imagine. There's hardly an apology from the rugby player, just a sort of mumbled excuse about a busy train. And then that phone call that he's just picked up, it's one of his teammates. Doesn't take long before they're talking tactics about the game, laughing and joking about the opposition, about what they might do to the opposition whilst the referee's back is turned. And then talking about the referee, you see rugby teams, they always get told who their referee is going to be, and they'd heard this guy's name before, but they'd never been refereed by him. They've heard all about him though, and on the phone, they're just mouthing off, slating this referee to each other for the next 10 minutes or so.

A couple of hours later, our rugby player, he's made it to the game, he's warming up with his team, and then this unknown referee, the one that he's just been talking about on the phone to his friend, comes out of the changing room, and he's really tall, right? You can guess who it was. It's the guy from the train, the guy that he'd failed to give any space to, the guy that he'd spilt his coffee all over, the guy he'd spent 10 minutes chatting about on the phone with his teammates.

If only he'd known, right? If only he'd known who'd come and sat opposite him, he'd never have done any of those things. It's true, isn't it, that knowing who someone is, this is just a really basic fact, knowing who someone is, is really important for how we relate to them. And that's really the heart behind this series that we're in together. This is our God. It's for us to really get to know our God and watch as the way that we relate to him is transformed. And so friends, wherever you're at with this, as we think about the Trinity, especially tonight, and as we journey through this whole series together, we've just got to see that as we get to know our God, it's going to transform the way that we relate to him. As we get to know him, the better we're going to be able to delight in him, and the better we're going to be able to love and know that we are loved by him.

[4 : 25] But more than that, because I think it's only really by knowing this triune God that we can grasp who we are as humans, and importantly, as Christians. As the Bible introduces us to this

God, and as we explore that in this series, we're actually being invited to get to know ourselves better at the same time. Let me illustrate how this works. There she is, Katie, my wife. Any excuse to talk about her?

She's beautiful, isn't she? We've been married for two and a half years, and it's been this weird sort of roller coaster. I suppose like any relationship, I've spent more time with Katie, though, than any other human being. I mean, we literally live together, don't we? We share a bed. And I've just gone to know Katie to a depth that I never have any other human being. But as I'm getting to know her, I'm also getting to know myself. Marriage, it's revealed a depth of selfishness in me that I never knew existed. My dream scenario of an evening watching sport or at the pub with some friends, or my morning reading punctuated with the annoying conversation and the buzz of the news in the background. I get frustrated at these things. I get annoyed. I don't want to, but I do, because I'm just so selfish. Yet at the same time, I've also discovered a new capacity in me for self-giving, for doing things that are inconvenient to me, that yet in my better moments, I don't even think about it, because I love her.

Getting to know Katie, it's revealed, and it continues to reveal both my flaws and some more of my redeeming features, too. And here's the point. In this relationship that I have with my wife, I'm getting to know myself as much as I'm getting to know her. And I think that's true for all of us. I mean, I'm sure any of you could put a picture of one or some of the most significant people in your lives on the screen.

We'd love to hear those stories. But one of the things would be that somehow your relationship with this person, somehow it's also leading to more awareness and growth in yourself as well.

And in the same way, as we get to relate to this triune God, we get to know ourselves better at the same time. And even as we begin, it's just worth acknowledging one of the first things that we learn about ourselves as we look at this God, I think we saw this last week with Alistair, we as creatures are going to struggle to understand how the triune God works, especially in a sort of tidy, joined-up way. In fact, I think if we do think that we've got there, I think it might be quite a good sign that we just don't know this God at all. Because we're creatures, and the one we're trying to get to know is Creator. He's just so different from us. And so you might be sitting there and thinking, okay, well then what's the point? Why would we even try? But it's the same with our relationships with each other. I'm never going to know Katie completely. I'm never going to know everything that goes through her head or everything she's ever thought. She's very different from me in very many ways. But that doesn't mean it's not worth getting to know her. Or that getting to know her won't help me understand myself better too. And so with all that in mind, as we unpack a bit about the Trinity from God's Word this evening, just three things for us to see, three things that show us just how wonderful it is that we have a triune God. Because a triune God really loves you.

[8 : 01] And as a result of that, a triune God really does not need you. And a triune God can really adopt you. So let's begin as we explore this truth that the triune God really loves you. And to do that, we're going to start with Jesus. Because it's here with the Son that we see that the triune God is fundamentally a loving God. What does the fact that Jesus is the Son of God reveal?

Well, it means, doesn't it, that God is a Father. Importantly, He didn't become a Father, but He is eternally a Father. I wonder if you've ever asked a good question to ask, what was God doing before the creation of the world? Maybe you noticed the answer to that question in the passage we've just had read. What does Jesus pray in verse 24? Father, because you loved me before the creation of the world. You see, God has eternally been Father. And what does He do as a Father? Well, a Father is life-giving, self-giving, loving. And we'll see that He does that by His Spirit. But let me just say at this stage that it's not always the earthly experience of fathers in this world that we have, is it? Maybe your Father was nothing like that. Maybe you're a Father and you know that you're nothing like that. And that's hard. That can be really painful. But I just want us to see tonight what that pain points to. Because it hurts precisely because we feel that there should be a perfect Father.

And because we are creatures and He is Creator, this is the perfect Father, loving His Son eternally. And that means that His creation then isn't a random accident. No, creation is a wonderful outpouring of that eternally self-giving nature. It's an overflow of love.

Genesis chapter 1. I think it's worth briefly turning to Genesis chapter 1. It won't be difficult to find. It's right at the beginning of your Bible. And here is this account of creation.

And this account of creation is just dripping with Trinity language. Notice in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2, it's the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. And do you see how God creates? The actual process of creation, how does it work? In almost every paragraph it says this, and God said, and it was so. And God said, and it was so. And God said, and it was so. It is by His Word that God creates. It's by His Word. Park that idea.

[11:13] We'll come back to that idea in a second. But just while we're here, while we're in Genesis, for another hint of the Trinity, check out verse 26 of chapter 21. Verse 26, Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. Notice the plural there.

This triune God creates humans, humans that are different to one another, because they're created in the image of a triune God. You see how we're getting to know ourselves as we're getting to know Him?

And see what God does next. He blesses them. He loves them. And out of His overflowing love, He says, go and do likewise. Overflow with love yourselves to be fruitful and increase in number, living and loving in community, just like He is.

Just before we leave Genesis, come to chapter 2 with me. Chapter 2 is a sort of retelling of the creation of humanity from another angle. This is really cool. It's another hint of the triune God. In verse 7, chapter 2, verse 7. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

[12:31] Breath there is literally wind or spirit. And so God, out of His overflowing love, in His glorious creation, breathes His spirit, His life-giving breath.

Friends, it's by His wonderful grace, in the Father's love for us, overflowing love. And it's only by that that we even have life itself.

Isn't that a wonderful truth? Now we parked that idea, didn't we? And God said, and it was so. Come back to John chapter 1 with me then. John chapter 1, start at the New Testament.

Sorry, I know we're jumping around a lot. John chapter 1, verse 1 says this. Suddenly then, that apparently impersonal attribute of God, His words, as He speaks creation into being, they're described in this verse, aren't they?

Like a person, an eternal person, both with God and God Himself. And then in verse 14, if you track down the page, the Word became flesh.

[13:51] We've just sung about it, conceived by the Holy Spirit. John is talking about Jesus. This is the Son whom the Father has loved eternally. The Son who He sent out of His overflowing love.

The Son who was there at creation, before creation. And then at creation, He was there, deeply involved. Because He was God's very words.

And God said, and it was so. It's by His Word, by His Son, that He creates. And then, of course, He so loved the world that He sent that very word, His beloved Son, into the world that they created together.

In Mark chapter 1, you don't need to turn there, but in Mark 1, we get Jesus' baptism. And the Spirit descends on Jesus, on the Son, like a dove. It's the Father declaring His love for the Son.

So this is how the Father loves His Son. The Father pouring His love on His Son by His Spirit. And that is true in eternity. Friends, if we see nothing else this evening, let it be this.

[15:03] Our God is outrageously loving. And He's outrageously loving because He is a triune God. He is and always has been completely self-giving, life-sharing, outpouring love.

This is our God. And so He loves you. Because of who He is. Because He is a triune God.

Not because of who you are. This isn't contingent on whether you feel loved by Him. He doesn't love us because we're at church this evening.

He doesn't love us because we gave a tithe this month. Or because we're about to come to the bread and the cup together. Or because we read our Bibles this week. Or because we avoided that nagging temptation.

Our obedience to Him does not earn us His love. In the same way, He doesn't stop loving us when we skip church.

[16:07] Or when we leave church and we spend our whole week ignoring the poverty around us in the streets. When we give in to temptation this week. Our God loves us because He is outrageously self-giving, overflowing, outpouring, life-giving of Himself.

And of course He desires us to live for Him in obedience to Him. Which means being transformed into His likeness. But friends, He loves us even when we don't image Him.

Just as He loves us when we do. Friends, a broken man like me just finds that truth so comforting. And I hope you do too. Do you see how getting to know our God like this, do you see how it transforms the way we relate to Him?

And it leads to another surprisingly comforting truth. Because the truth is, a triune God really does not need you. It might not sound comforting, but hopefully you'll see how it is.

It's easy, I think, to slip into thinking of our God as three different gods. That because our God is three, He isn't really one. But as Christians, we really do believe in one God.

[17 : 24] And that's hard to wrap our heads around. It's a mathematical impossibility. Folks have tried for years to come up with analogies to help explain it. Taking things from creation, like an egg, right, has three parts.

The shell, the white, the yolk. Or the sun. It's a star, but it's also light and heat. But whatever analogy you use to try and explain the Trinity, you quickly run into problems.

There's this hilarious video on YouTube. I'm sure some of you will watch it. We don't have time to watch it together now. It's called, I think, St. Patrick's Bad Analogies. Genuinely, it's really worth watching.

It's hilarious. But why is it that all these analogies are so problematic? Well, at its heart, for each of them, it's because God is not like us.

Yes, we're a bit like him, but he's not like us. He is creator. We are creature. And so there's nothing in created order that could possibly do him justice in that way.

[18 : 26] But Christians everywhere do believe in the Trinity, right? Three persons. And yet we do believe in one God. The Bible is very clear on that. Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4.

Again, you don't need to turn there, but Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4 says this. These might be familiar words. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is what?

Not three. The Lord is one. It's just so clear we believe in one God. Of course, we see hints of a triune God in creation and so on.

But it is true that the emphasis in the Old Testament is very firmly on one God. So what do we do with that? Well, theologian, there he is, B.B. Warfield.

Look at that beard. He puts it like this. The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber, richly furnished but dimly lighted. The introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before, but brings out into clearer view much of what is in it, but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before.

[19 : 38] In other words, though the Trinity is not clearly revealed in the Old Testament, there are hints of it, but it is nonetheless foundational to how the Old Testament hangs together.

And so the New Testament doesn't come and correct the Old Testament. It simply casts light on what is already there. And so the one God that we believe in is three.

And that's really good news. Here's why. Because a single person God would be dependent on his creation to be loving.

Let me show you why. See, if God exists in eternity and exists in eternity on his own with no one and nothing to love, well, then he's not eternally loving, is he?

He is eternally lonely. Now, you might say that he could exist eternally with an anticipation of his creation, loving that which he looks forward to.

[20 : 42] But even if that were true, he would still be dependent on the creation that he has yet to create in order to be loving, to be who he is, dependent on his creation, dependent on us.

But friends, our God, a triune God, does not need his creation, does not need us. Why? Because he is a father eternally loving the son by the spirit.

It can be really helpful, I think, as we speak to our atheist friends about God or our agnostic friends about God to find out what sort of God they don't believe in.

I had a conversation like this just this weekend. Because the chances are we don't believe in that God either. And this is where we would want to lovingly say to our Muslim friends that their God, Allah, is logically impossible.

How can he be, as they claim, as the Quran, their holy book, claims that he is, be both eternally loving and eternally self-reliant without being triune?

[21 : 55] Our God does not need us to be who he is. And friends, that is an incredibly freeing truth. It completely transforms the way that we relate to this God.

Imagine if God relied on us. I don't know about you, but I would find the weight of that to be unbearable, I think. It means that all that God asks of us, though it shows him to be glorious, it does not make him anything that he isn't already.

Instead, we serve this outrageously loving God, because in doing so we can freely enjoy his life-giving love.

Having a God that is outrageously loving and that doesn't need us, a triune God, it also has massive implications for the gospel. This is our last point this evening.

It has implications for the gospel because it also means that he can really adopt us. It's very easy for us to think like this. The Father was the God of Israel in the Old Testament, and then Jesus came in the New Testament to die for our sins, and then the Spirit came, and he's the one that's with us now to separate the works of God like that.

[23 : 16] But the truth is, in all those works of God, in his rescue of the Israelites in the Exodus, in his salvation of the world in the gospels, his presence with us today, in all of those works, it is the triune God who is at work.

Theologian Michael Horton puts it like this, it's not different works, but different roles in every work that the divine persons perform.

It might be helpful then to think of it like this, in the works of God, generally speaking, the Father initiates, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit applies.

I think that can sometimes be a helpful way to think, initiates, accomplishes, and applies, and we're just going to see how that works in salvation. We tend to think of the gospel in quite simple terms, I think.

God created us good, but we did bad, and so we die, but Jesus paid the price for our sin, and so we get to live forever. And friends, that's not wrong, is it?

[24 : 25] But God's purposes through that gospel are so much more wonderful for us. And I think it begins with the fall. See, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, we tend to think of that as just like a plain old rebellion, breaking the rules.

But really, it's all about love. See, God lovingly created us in His image. That means that we were created to be self-giving, loving, overflowing creatures, living and loving in community like Him.

See how we're learning about ourselves as we learn about God? But what we see in the fall is that that outgoing love is bent inwards as humans begin to make selfish, self-glorifying, inward-loving decisions.

And so we see that Jesus' death doesn't simply pay the price for our rebellion, but it paves the way for our love to be reordered and for us to be adopted as children of God.

1 John 3, verse 1 says this, it's a wonderful truth. See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.

[25 : 47] And that is what we are. That we might be progressively restored to His image of living and loving in community as the human race, as children of God.

And why does He want to do that? Well, did you notice in John chapter 17, as it was read for us, in verse 25, what did Jesus pray?

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you. And they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

The Father loves to love His Son so much that He wants all those who believe in Him to share in that love, to share in that eternal, outrageous, self-giving, outpouring love.

And He applies that love by sending His Spirit to those who believe. This is eternal life. To share in God's love as His children.

[27 : 01] The theologian J.I. Packer puts it like this, if you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much He makes of the thought of being God's child and having God as His Father.

What that means is that tonight, if you're a Christian, the way that you relate to this God has been totally transformed. Because you're not just a creature of His, but a son and a daughter.

That means that you can say, I have a wonderful inheritance and that is eternal life with the Trinity. Because I receive all that the Father has for the Son.

Because I have been adopted. That means it's mine. I have a right to it. I am entitled. No one can take it away from me. What a wonderful hope that we have.

What a wonderful gospel. What a wonderful, loving, life, and self-giving triune Savior, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[28 : 13] Friends, is this the God that you know? Remember our hapless rugby player, how he related to that referee on the train?

How we relate to someone depends, doesn't it, on how we know them. Well, how well do we know our God? This triune God.

And look, we don't need to get this right all the time. In fact, and I think this really is a wonderful thing, I don't think that we're ever going to arrive at a complete knowledge of our God. But no matter how far we've gone on this journey, there are unplumbed depths for us to enjoy.

There are lots of resources that we can access to help us do that. I've found this book, *The Good God*, by Michael Reeves, really especially helpful in thinking about the triune God.

Do try and get hold of that, the good God. And the creeds are great as well. We just sung some of one of those. The Athanasius Creed, you might find especially helpful in thinking about this.

[29 : 17] And of course, as we read our Bibles, we can just be paying attention to the language of the Trinity as we've been doing this evening. John chapter 17 is brilliant for that.

The few chapters that run into it, if you want some bedtime reading tonight, read from John chapter 14 to John chapter 17. There is a treasure trove of riches for us to get to know our God in his word. Are we going to keep digging at them? And then echo the prayers of Paul for the Ephesian church. This is what Paul prays for the church in Ephesus. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.

Will we resolve to be a church that never gives up on getting to know our God better and more deeply? Shall we pray?

Why don't we pray like that this evening? Heavenly Father, we long to know you.

[30 : 29] We thank you that because you have sent your son, we can know you. Jesus, we thank you for all that you have done for us.

We thank you, Father, for sending your Holy Spirit to be present with us. We pray that you would help us to know you better this evening as we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.