

# Welcome

I remember the first day of my Intro to Philosophy class in college. I went to a private Southern Baptist university, so every single kid in class was your typical born-and-raised in youth group kid. You weren't allowed to take Philosophy until your sophomore year, and all anyone would say about the class was that the professor was awe-inspiring. In that classical sense that he was both awesome and awful. He famously gave finals that were a single question. The most pervasive legend I heard was that one year the question was, "Why?"

One student wrote, "Why not?" and aced the exam, while another turned in, "Because," and failed.

Imagine with me, then, that all those kids enter with fear and trembling to Day 1 of philosophy and we see scrawled on the board GOD DOES NOT EXIST.

Let's be clear: this was a private Southern Baptist university. We were not allowed to think such things, let alone to say them out loud let alone *write them on the board in class*.

Then, out of myth and legend and into our classroom walks the professor. Dr. Cochrane was an ancient bald man who made these sweeping, cryptic pronouncements and refused to answer questions (so yeah, typical philosophy professor).

He looks out at us and, without introduction, announces, "GOD! DOES NOT! EXIST!"

What followed was a rousing conversation about what, exactly, God is. Dr. Cochran pointed out fairly early on that God is a three letter word that is so vague as to be meaningless. Ten different people could be talking about 'God' and be talking about ten completely different ideas, entities, or persons.

Obviously, it's a conversation that's stayed with me for more than two decades, and shaped how I approach faith.

I want to ask with you today, "How do we know who God is? How do we know if the things we believe about God are true things? And what's at stake in this conversation?"

What we're going to see will probably be surprising to a lot of us. We don't know God because of logical proofs or clever arguments.

We know God because of how God makes themselves know to us: as the liberator, the savior. We know God because we know Jesus!

## Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. Some real doozies, if I'm being honest.

We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

So a couple of thoughts on asking questions:

First, a lot of churches look at doubt and questions as enemies of faith. We make a villain out of Doubting Thomas. I know for a fact a lot of you have been villainized for asking exactly the kinds of questions we're exploring in this series.

Here at Catalyst, we know better. Doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers. So we want to do the same thing here, this summer.

That brings me to my second point: we're not trying to settle questions here. I think what a lot of us secretly think is that it's okay to ask questions as long as you eventually get the right answer. Because what God really desires is certainty.

So let me say this clearly: the goal of this series is to creation conversation, not consensus.

What's the goal? Conversation. Not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

So with that in mind, let's look at our first question for the series:

"I read a lot of books with very in depth lore regard the god or gods or goddesses that rule that world. How do we know that our god isn't just that made thousands of years ago that we've now turned into a religion?"

This is a terrific question, one that's in the same neighborhood as, "How do we know our religion is the right one?"

There are dozens of religions out there, and they all have their mix of the good, the bad and the ugly. If we're brutally honest with ourselves, it's often pretty hard to tell the difference between Christians and anyone else.

The question only gets harder when we take a hard look at the Bible. After all, as you can imagine, Christianity looked very different 1,000 years ago, to say nothing of 2,000 years ago. The congregations Paul founded, for instance, met in homes, around meals. Each person

probably contributed something, from a song to speaking in tongues to a word of prophecy to teaching.

And let's not forget that Christianity only came into being *after* Jesus. Before that was Judaism, which existed for about 600 years before Jesus, all the way back to the Babylonian Exile.

Before Judaism, religion in Israel was based around the Temple and sacrifices. There wasn't really a Bible - most people couldn't read so all the Scriptures were kept in the Temple and memorized and taught by priests. And *that* religion looked a lot like the other religions around, from Egypt and Babylon to the various Canaanite kingdoms around Israel. What mattered most was which God was in your Temple - was it Dagon or Marduk or Chemosh or Ba'al or Yahweh?

And if you keep going back, back, back to where our archaeological records get sketchy, it sort of seems like Yahweh might have been one of the gods in the Canaanite pantheon, a god Israel chose.

So imagine if one little city state in Greece had decided Apollo was their chief God, and that religion kept surviving and evolving until today, Apollo was considered the only God and the one everyone worshiped. And no one had really ever heard of Zeus or Hades or Poseidon or any of the other Greek gods.

That's kind of what a lot of scholars think happened with Yahweh and Israel.

Now, this is where we all want to start panicking, right? Am I saying that God isn't real, that Christianity is all a lie?

So, deep breath.

Because this is actually how the Scriptures illustrate how humanity came to know God. Look how God enters into the human story in [Genesis 12](#):

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you." — [Genesis 12:1-3](#) (NLT)

(By the way, whenever you see LORD in all caps like that, it's a substitute for God's name, Yahweh.) So literally, Yahweh just pops down with no introduction to Abram and says, "Let's go!"

We follow Abram and his descendants Isaac and Jacob, and then the whole family winds up in Egypt.

Fast-forward 400 years and those descendants are enslaved. God reaches out to a guy named Moses, and I want you to pay close attention to how Yahweh introduces himself this time:

“Do not come any closer,” the Lord warned. “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.” -- Exodus 3:5–10 (NLT)

God doesn't offer intellectual proofs. God appeals to God's previous action. “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

Black Liberation theologian James Cone highlights that this is how we know God:

“Black theology agrees with contemporary theology that God's self-disclosure is the distinctive characteristic of divine revelation. Divine revelation is not the rational discovery of God's attributes, or the assent to infallible biblical propositions, or an aspect of human self-consciousness. Rather, revelation has to do with God as God is in personal relationship with humankind effecting the divine will in our history.” -- James Cone

Knowing God always begins with God knowing *us*. We don't start by our reaching for God, either through the rational arguments of the philosophers or the mystical experiences of the spiritualists. We know God because God knows us first. We know God because of what God *does* to reach us.

And what does God do? In other words, what do we see God doing in human history? Look back at what God said to Moses:

Then the LORD told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians... — [Exodus 3:7-8a](#)

Cone explains:

“Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*. To know God is to know God's work of liberation in behalf of the oppressed. God's revelation means liberation, an

emancipation from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society. This is the essence of biblical revelation.” -- James Cone

The *essence* of biblical revelation is God-as-liberator. We know God primarily as the one who fights oppression, the one who works for freedom and flourishing for all of us!

## Song

The idea that God is a liberator is hard for some of us to hear. If you are like me, you grew up in a Church that *never* talked about politics or social issues (apart from the implied pressure to be Republican and conservative on social issues). But we certainly never talked about God as a liberator. We talked about Jesus as our *personal* Lord and savior.

We had this divide between personal salvation and corporate liberation that no one ever questioned. But let's not forget what we saw in our last series:

Jesus shows us most fully who God is. Do you remember this conversation we saw between Jesus and his followers?

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don't know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?” — [John 14:8-9](#)

Jesus shows us most fully who God is. So if the God we meet in human history as a liberator, as the one who stands against oppression on behalf of the vulnerable is real, we should expect to see Jesus acting not just as a personal savior but as a corporate liberator - one who's standing against political, economic and cultural oppression.

And friends, this is *exactly* how we see Jesus describe his mission in his own words in [Luke 4](#). When he's ready to kick off his Messianic mission, he goes to his hometown and reads an announcement of God's liberating mission from the prophet Isaiah. Pay attention to what he says at the end of it:

When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD's favor has come.”

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them:

“The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!” — [Luke 4:16-21](#)

Jesus says, “You’re watching this mission come to life right now. In me.

And of course we know this is exactly what Jesus did. His ministry was revolutionary, so much so that both the Jewish and Roman leaders were agitated. Rome didn’t crucify nice guys. They didn’t even crucify bad guys. Rome crucified political enemies.

So we can trust Jesus when he says that he shows us God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The God of the Exodus.

How do we know God is real? We ask if we’ve experienced God. And we expect to find God in sites of oppression, working for liberation and justice!

## Communion + Examen

The table shows us how Jesus liberates us!

When in the last week have I taken time to know God better?

When in the last week have I settled for second-hand information about God?

How can I pursue God in a personal way this week?

How might God be calling me to join in the work of liberation?

## Assignment + Blessing

## Deleted Scene:

Where did personal salvation w/o liberation come from? —> Slaveholder theology

We should be both!