

Suso and His Spiritual Daughter

by W.R. Inge

The sermon explores the nature of God, including His simplicity, unity, and threefold nature, and how He relates to His creatures.

Scripture: Psalm 139:6, Proverbs 8:22, Isaiah 55:8, John 1:1, John 4:24, Romans 11:33, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Colossians 2:9, 1 John 4:8

Topics: "Gods Nature", "The Trinity"

Description

W.R. Inge delves into the deep questions about the nature of God, explaining the complexity of understanding God's essence and the concept of the Trinity. He describes God as an immortal, eternal, unchangeable, and incorporeal Spirit, whose essence is a source of joy and happiness. Inge explores the idea of God being everywhere and in all things, emphasizing the unity and simplicity of God's essence. He further discusses the Trinity as a divine outpouring of love and goodness within the Godhead, leading to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in perfect communion and equality.

Transcript

AFTER this, certain very high thoughts arose in the mind of the servitor's spiritual daughter, concerning which she asked him whether she might put questions to him. He replied, Yea verily: since thou hast been led through the proper exercises, it is permitted to thy spiritual intelligence to enquire about high things. Ask then whatever thou wilt. She said: Tell me, father, what is God, and how He is both One and Three? The servitor replied, These be indeed high questions. As to the first, What is God, you must know that all the Doctors who ever lived cannot explain it, for He is above all sense and reason.

Yet if a man is diligent, and does not relax his efforts, he gains some knowledge of God, though very far off. Yet in this knowledge of God consists our eternal life and man's supreme happiness. In this way, in former times, certain worthy philosophers searched for God, and especially that great thinker Aristotle, who tried to discover the Author of Nature from the order of nature and its course. He sought earnestly, and he was convinced from the well-ordered course of nature that there must of necessity be one Prince and Lord of the whole universe--He whom we call God.

About this God and Lord we know this much, that He is an immortal Substance, eternal, without before or after, simple, bare, unchangeable, an incorporeal and essential Spirit, whose substance is life and energy, whose most penetrating intelligence knows all things in and by itself, whose essence in itself is an abyss of pleasures and joys, and who is to Himself, and to all who shall enjoy Him in a future life, a supernatural,

ineffable, and most sweet happiness. The maiden, when she heard this, looked up, and said: These things are sweet to tell and sweet to hear, for they rouse the heart, and lift the spirit up far beyond itself.

Therefore, father, tell me more about these things. The servitor said: The Divine Essence, about which we speak, is an intelligible or intellectual Substance of such a kind, that it cannot be seen in itself by mortal eyes; but it can be discerned in its effects, even as we recognise a fine artist by his works. As the Apostle teaches us, "The invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made." For the creatures are a kind of mirror, in which God shines.

This knowledge is called speculation, by which we contemplate the great Architect of the world in His works. Come now, look upward and about thee, through all the quarters of the universe, and see how wide and high the beautiful heaven is, how swift its motion, and how marvellously its Creator has adorned it with the seven planets, and with the countless multitude of the twinkling stars. Consider what fruitfulness, what riches, the sun bestows upon the earth, when in summer it sheds abroad its rays unclouded!

See how the leaves and grass shoot up, and the flowers smile, and the woods and plains resound with the sweet song of nightingales and other birds; how all the little animals, after being imprisoned by grim winter, come forth rejoicing, and pair; and how men and women, both old and young, rejoice and are merry. O Almighty God, if Thou art so lovable and so pleasant in Thy creatures, how happy and blessed, how full of all joy and beauty, must Thou be in Thyself? But further, my daughter, contemplate the elements themselves--Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, with all the wonderful things which they contain in infinite variety--men, beasts, birds, fishes, and sea-monsters.

And all of these give praise and honour to the unfathomable immensity that is in Thee. Who is it, Lord, who preserves all these things, who nourishes them? It is Thou who providest for all, each in his own way, for great and small, rich and poor. Thou, O God, doest this; Thou alone art God indeed! Behold, my daughter, thou hast now found the God whom thou hast sought so long. Look up, then, with shining eyes, with radiant face and exulting heart, behold Him and embrace Him with the outstretched arms of thy soul and mind, and give thanks to Him as the one and supreme Lord of all creatures.

By gazing on this mirror, there springs up speedily, in one of loving and pious disposition, an inward jubilation of the heart; for by this is meant a joy which no tongue can tell, though it pours with might through heart and soul. Alas, I now feel within me, that I must open for thee the closed mouth of my soul; and I am compelled, for the glory of God, to tell thee certain secrets, which I never yet told to any one. A certain Dominican, well known to me, at the beginning of his course used to receive from God twice every day, morning and evening, for ten years, an outpouring of grace like this, which lasted about as long as it would take to say the "Vigils of the Dead" twice over.[40] At these times he was so entirely absorbed in God, the eternal Wisdom, that he would not speak of it.

Sometimes he would converse with God as with a friend, not with the mouth, but mentally; at other times he would utter piteous sighs to Him; at other times he would weep copiously, or smile silently. He often seemed to himself to be flying in the air, and swimming between time and eternity in the depth of the Divine wonders, which no man can fathom. And his heart became so full from this, that he would sometimes lay his hand upon it as it beat heavily, saying, "Alas, my heart, what labours will befall thee to-day?"

One day it seemed to him that the heart of his heavenly Father was, in a spiritual and indescribable manner, pressed tenderly, and with nothing between, against his heart; and that the Father's heart--that is,

the eternal Wisdom, spoke inwardly to his heart without forms.[41] Then he began to exclaim joyously in spiritual jubilation: Behold, now, Thou whom I most fervently love, thus do I lay bare my heart to Thee, and in simplicity and nakedness of all created things I embrace Thy formless Godhead!

O God, most excellent of all friends! Earthly friends must needs endure to be distinct and separate from those whom they love; but Thou, O fathomless sweetness of all true love, meltest into the heart of Thy beloved, and pourest Thyself fully into the essence of his soul, that nothing of Thee remains outside, but Thou art joined and united most lovingly with Thy beloved.

To this the maiden replied: Truly it is a great grace, when anyone is thus caught up into God. But I should like to be informed, whether this is the most perfect kind of union or not? The servitor answered: No, it is not the most perfect, but a preliminary, gently drawing a man on, that he may arrive at an essential way of being carried up into God. The maiden asked him what he meant by essential and non-essential. He answered: I call that man essential or habitual (so to speak), who by the good and persevering practice of all the virtues, has arrived at the point of finding the practice of them in their highest perfection pleasant to him, even as the brightness of the sun remains constant in the sun. But I call him non-essential, in whom the brightness of the virtues shines in an unstable and imperfect way like the brightness of the moon. That full delight of grace which I described is so sweet to the spirit of the non-essential man, that he would be glad always to have it. When he has it, he rejoices; when he is deprived of it, he grieves inordinately; and when it smiles upon him, he is reluctant to pass to doing other things, even things that are pleasing to God; as I will show you by an example. The servitor of the Divine Wisdom was once walking in the chapter-house, and his heart was full of heavenly jubilation, when the porter called him out to see a woman who wished to confess to him. He was unwilling to interrupt his inward delight, and received the porter harshly, bidding him tell the woman that she must find some one else to confess to, for he did not wish to hear her confession just then. She, however, being oppressed with the burden of her sins, said that she felt specially drawn to seek comfort from him, and that she would confess to no one else. And when he still refused to go out, she began to weep most sadly, and going into a corner, lamented greatly. Meanwhile, God quickly withdrew from the servitor the delights of grace, and his heart became as hard as flint. And when he desired to know the cause of this, God answered him inwardly: Even as thou hast driven away uncomforted that poor woman, so have I withdrawn from thee my Divine comfort. The servitor groaned deeply and beat his breast, and hurried to the door, and as he did not find the woman there, was much distressed. The porter, however, looked about for her everywhere, and when he found her, still weeping, bade her return to the door. When she came, the servitor received her gently, and comforted her sorrowing heart. Then he went back from her to the chapter-house, and immediately God was with him, with His Divine consolations, as before.

Then said the maiden: It must be easy for him to bear sufferings, to whom God gives such jubilation and internal joys. And yet, said the servitor, all had to be paid for afterward with great suffering. However, at last, when all this had passed away, and God's appointed time had come, the same grace of jubilation was restored to him, and remained with him almost continuously both at home and abroad, in company and alone. Often in the bath or at table the same grace was with him; but it was now internal, and did show itself outside.

Then the maiden said: My father, I have now learned what God is; but I am also eager to know where He is. Thou shalt hear, said the servitor. The opinion of the theologians is that God is in no particular place, but that He is everywhere, and all in all. The same doctors say that we come to know a thing through its name. Now one doctor says that Being is the first name of God. Turn your eyes, therefore, to Being in its

pure and naked simplicity, and take no notice of this or that substance which can be torn asunder into parts and separated; but consider Being in itself, unmixed with any Not-Being. Whatever is nothing, is the negation of what is; and what is, is the negation of what is not. A thing which has yet to be, or which once was, is not now in actual being. Moreover, we cannot know mixed being or not-being unless we take into account that which is all-being. This Being is not the being of this or that creature; for all particular being is mixed with something extraneous, whereby it can receive something new into itself. Therefore the nameless Divine Being must be in itself a Being that is all-being, and that sustains all particular things by its presence.

It shows the strange blindness of man's reason, that it cannot examine into that which it contemplates before everything, and without which it cannot perceive anything. Just as, when the eye is bent on noticing various colours, it does not observe the light which enables it to see all these objects, and even if it looks at the light it does not observe it; so it is with the eye of the soul. When it looks at this or that particular substance, it takes no heed of the being, which is everywhere one, absolute and simple, and by the virtue and goodness of which it can apprehend all other things. Hence the wise Aristotle says, that the eye of our intelligence, owing to its weakness, is affected towards that being which is itself the most manifest of all things, as the eye of a bat or owl is towards the bright rays of the sun. For particular substances distract and dazzle the mind, so that it cannot behold the Divine darkness, which is the clearest light.

Come now, open the eyes of thy mind, and gaze if thou canst, on Being in its naked and simple purity. You will perceive that it comes from no one, and has no before nor after, and that it cannot change, because it is simple Being. You will also observe that it is the most actual, the most present, and the most perfect of beings, with no defect or mutation, because it is absolutely one in its bare simplicity. This is so evident to an instructed intellect, that it cannot think otherwise. Since it is simple Being, it must be the first of beings, and without beginning or end, and because it is the first and everlasting and simple, it must be the most present. If you can understand this, you will have been guided far into the incomprehensible light of God's hidden truth. This pure and simple Being is altogether in all things, and altogether outside all things. Hence a certain doctor says: God is a circle, whose centre is everywhere, and His circumference nowhere.

When this had been said, the maiden answered: Blessed be God, I have been shown, as far as may be, both what God is, and where He is. But I should like also to be told how, if God is so absolutely simple, He can also be threefold.

The servitor answered: The more simple any being is in itself, the more manifold is it in its energy and operation. That which has nothing gives nothing, and that which has much can give much. I have already spoken of the inflowing and overflowing fount of good which God is in Himself. This infinite and superessential goodness constrains Him not to keep it all within Himself, but to communicate it freely both within and without Himself. But the highest and most perfect outpouring of the good must be within itself, and this can be nought else but a present, interior, personal and natural outpouring, necessary, yet without compulsion, infinite and perfect. Other communications, in temporal matters, draw their origin from this eternal communication of the Divine Goodness. Some theologians say that in the outflow of the creatures from their first origin there is a return in a circle of the end to the beginning; for as the emanation of the Persons from the Godhead is an image of the origin of the creatures, so also it is a type of the flowing back of the creatures into God. There is, however, a difference between the outpouring of the creatures and that of God. The creature is only a particular and partial substance, and its giving and communication is also partial and limited. When a human father begets a son, he gives him part, but not the whole, of his own substance, for he himself is only a partial good. But the outpouring of God is of a

more interior and higher kind than the creature's outpouring, inasmuch as He Himself is a higher good. If the outpouring of God is to be worthy of His pre-eminent being, it must be according to personal relations.

Now, then, if you can look upon the pure goodness of the highest Good (which goodness is, by its nature, the active principle of the spontaneous love with which the highest Good loves itself) you will behold the most excellent and superessential outpouring of the Word from the Father, by which generation all things exist and are produced; and you will see also in the highest good, and the highest outpouring, the most holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, existing in the Godhead. And if the highest outpouring proceeds from the highest essential good, it follows that there must be in this Trinity the highest and most intimate consubstantiality or community of being, and complete equality and identity of essence, which the Persons enjoy in sweetest communion, and also that the Substance and power of the three almighty Persons is undivided and unpartitioned.

Here the maiden exclaimed: Marvellous! I swim in the Godhead like an eagle in the air. The servitor, resuming his exposition, continued: It is impossible to express in words how the Trinity can subsist in the unity of one essence. Nevertheless, to say what may be said on the subject, Augustine says that in the Godhead the Father is the Fountain-head of the Son and the Holy Ghost. Dionysius says, that in the Father there is an outflowing of the Godhead, which naturally communicates itself to the Word or Son. He also freely and lovingly pours Himself out into the Son; and the Son in turn pours Himself out freely and lovingly into the Father; and this love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father, is the Holy Ghost. This is truly said, but it is made clearer by that glorious Doctor of the Church, St Thomas, who says as follows: In the outpouring of the Word from the Father's heart, God the Father must contemplate Himself with His own mind, bending back, as it were, upon His Divine essence; for if the reason of the Father had not the Divine essence for its object, the Word so conceived would be a creature instead of God; which is false. But in the way described He is "God of God." Again, this looking back upon the Divine essence, which takes place in the mind of God, must, in a manner, produce a natural likeness; else the Word would not be the Son of God. So here we have the unity of essence in the diversity of Persons; and a clear proof of this distinction may be found in the word of that soaring eagle St John: "The Word was in the beginning with God."

Thus the Father is the Fountain-head of the Son, and the Son is the outflowing of the Father; and the Father and Son pour forth the Spirit; and the Unity, which is the essence of the Fountain-head, is also the substance of the three Persons. But as to how the Three are One, this cannot be expressed in words, on account of the simplicity of that Abyss. Into this intellectual Where, the spirits of men made perfect soar and plunge themselves, now flying over infinite heights, now swimming in unfathomed depths, marvelling at the high and wonderful mysteries of the Godhead. Nevertheless, the spirit remains a spirit, and retains its nature, while it enjoys the vision of the Divine Persons, and abstracted from all occupation with things below contemplates with fixed gaze those stupendous mysteries. For what can be more marvellous than that simple Unity, into which the Trinity of the Persons merges itself, and in which all multiplicity ceases? For the outflowing of the Persons is always tending back into the Unity of the same essence, and all creatures, according to their ideal existence in God, are from eternity in this Unity, and have their life, knowledge, and essence in the eternal God; as it is said in the Gospel: "That which was made, was Life in Him." [42] This bare Unity is a dark silence and tranquil inactivity, which none can understand unless he is illuminated by the Unity itself, unmixed with any evil. Out of this shines forth hidden truth, free from all falsehood; and this truth is born from the unveiling of the veiled Divine purity; for after the revelation of these things, the spirit is at last unclothed of the dusky light which up till now has followed it, and in which it

has hitherto seen things in an earthly way. Indeed, the spirit finds itself now changed and something very different from what it supposed itself to be according to its earlier light: even as St Paul says, "I, yet not I." Thus it is unclothed and simplified in the simplicity of the Divine essence, which shines upon all things in simple stillness. In this modeless mode of contemplation, the permanent distinction of the Persons, viewed as separate, is lost. For, as some teach, it is not the Person of the Father, taken by Himself, which produces bliss, nor the Person of the Son, taken by Himself, nor the Person of the Holy Ghost, taken by Himself; but the three Persons, dwelling together in the unity of the essence, confer bliss. And this is the natural essence of the Persons, which by grace gives the substance or essence to all their creatures, and it contains in itself the ideas of all things in their simple essence. Now since this ideal light subsists as Being, so all things subsist in it according to their essential being, not according to their accidental forms; and since it shines upon all things, its property is to subsist as light. Hence all things shine forth in this essence in interior stillness, without altering its simplicity.

Then the maiden said: I could wish greatly, sir, that you could give me this mysterious teaching, as you understand it, under a figure, that I might understand it better. I should also be glad if you could sum up what you have been saying at length, so that it may stick more firmly in my weak mind. The servitor replied: Who can express in forms what has no form? Who can explain that which has no mode of being, and is above sense and reason? Any similitude must be infinitely more unlike than like the reality. Nevertheless, that I may drive out forms from your mind by forms, I will try to give you a picture of these ideas which surpass all forms, and to sum up a long discourse in a few words. A certain wise theologian says that God, in regard to His Godhead, is like a vast circle, of which the centre is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere. Now consider the image which follows. If anyone throws a great stone into the middle of a pool, a ring is formed in the water, and this ring makes a second ring, and the second a third; and the number and size of the rings depend on the force of the throw. They may even require a larger space than the limit of the pool. Suppose now that the first ring represents the omnipotent virtue of the Divine nature, which is infinite in God the Father. This produces another ring like itself, which is the Son. And the two produce the third, which is the Holy Ghost. The spiritual superessential begetting of the Divine Word is the cause of the creation of all spirits and all things. This supreme Spirit has so ennobled man, as to shed upon him a ray from His own eternal Godhead. This is the image of God in the mind, which is itself eternal. But many men turn away from this dignity of their nature, befouling the bright image of God in themselves, and turning to the bodily pleasures of this world. They pursue them greedily and devote themselves to them, till death unexpectedly stops them. But he who is wise, turns himself and elevates himself, with the help of the Divine spark in his soul, to that which is stable and eternal, whence he had his own origin: he says farewell to all the fleeting creatures, and clings to the eternal truth alone.

Attend also to what I say about the order in which the spirit ought to return to God. First of all, we should disentangle ourselves absolutely from the pleasures of the world, manfully turning our backs upon all vices; we should turn to God by continual prayers, by seclusion, and holy exercise, that the flesh may thus be subdued to the spirit. Next, we must offer ourselves willingly to endure all the troubles which may come upon us, from God, or from the creatures. Thirdly, we must impress upon ourselves the Passion of Christ crucified; we must fix upon our minds His sweet teaching, His most gentle conversation, His most pure life, which He gave us for our example, and so we must penetrate deeper and advance further in our imitation of Him. Fourthly, we must divest ourselves of external occupations, and establish ourselves in a tranquil stillness of soul by an energetic resignation, as if we were dead to self, and thought only of the honour of Christ and His heavenly Father. Lastly, we should be humble towards all men, whether friends or foes. . . . But all these images, with their interpretations, are as unlike the formless truth as a black Ethiopian is to

the bright sun.

Soon after this holy maiden died, and passed away happy from earth, even as her whole life had been conspicuous only for her virtues. After her death she appeared to her spiritual father in a vision. She was clothed in raiment whiter than snow; she shone with dazzling brightness, and was full of heavenly joy. She came near to him, and showed him in what an excellent fashion she had passed away into the simple Godhead. He saw and heard her with exceeding delight, and the vision filled his soul with heavenly consolations. When he returned to himself, he sighed most deeply, and thus pondered: O Almighty God, how blessed is he, who strives after Thee alone! He may well be content to bear affliction, whose sufferings Thou wilt thus reward! May the Almighty God grant that we likewise may be brought to the same joys as this blessed maiden!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/wr-inge/suso-and-his-spiritual-daughter/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net