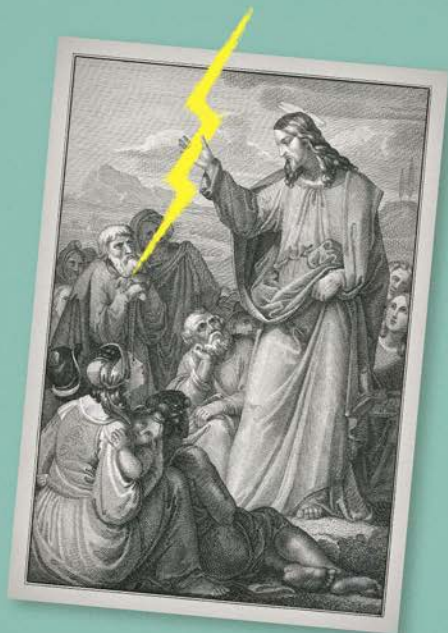


# ACCIDENTAL PAGANS



INCLUDES  
BIBLE STUDY  
WITH VIDEO  
ACCESS

*Untangling the Roots of Our Fears About God—  
and Discovering Who He Really Is*

**RYAN LOKKESMOE**

*Author of Paul and His Team*

What a terrific book! In *Accidental Pagans*, Ryan Lokkesmoe takes a simple premise—that we often perceive God in a more pagan than Christian way—and shows us how we do this and why it's a problem. Then he offers a biblically based way to reframe our understanding. In each chapter, Ryan gives us an entertainingly written history of a specific pagan belief and shows us how we often see God through that lens without knowing it. This is an important and helpful read.

**Karl Vaters**, founder of Helping Small Churches Thrive at  
KarlVaters.com

Plenty of authors draw parallels between the first-century Roman world and ours, some more convincingly than others, but few know its ancient mythology better than Ryan Lokkesmoe, who shows us ways in which modern Christians can unwittingly resemble ancient polytheists. Our God is unchangeable, knowable, equally present everywhere, always focused on our good, interested in every part of our lives, and completely trustworthy, unlike the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses. As you learn about the capricious deities of the first century, you will see all kinds of similarities to mutant Christian teachings and attitudes that we need to recognize and then avoid. Very nicely done.

**Craig L. Blomberg**, distinguished professor emeritus of New Testament  
at Denver Seminary

Have you ever been afraid of God? Have you ever doubted his love, felt the victim of his whims, or been troubled by his temperament? If so, you will be edified by Ryan's message in *Accidental Pagans*. This book will be vital in helping Christians find freedom from false, surprisingly pagan concepts of God. Every chapter unmasks Satan's subtle lies about God that find their way into our subconscious. Thank you, Ryan, for reminding us that God is not a "moody disciplinarian" but a perfect, gentle Father! I will use and reference this book for the rest of my ministry and Christian journey.

**Cary Schmidt**, author and senior pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church,  
Newington, CT

# ACCIDENTAL PAGANS



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and Discovering Who He Really Is*

**RYAN LOKKESMOE**



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*Accidental Pagans: Untangling the Roots of Our Fears About God—and Discovering Who He Really Is*

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# Introduction

*What is God like?*

Is he a harmless grandfatherly figure, comfortably reclining on a cloud? A bohemian shouting about love (or wrath) through a megaphone on a street corner? An enigmatic entity who wound up the universe like a clock and now watches, disengaged, from afar? A scowling judge with a gavel? A thunderous tyrant surveilling our every move?

As Christians, we all too often approach God in a posture of fear, as if he were just another capricious deity in the ancient pantheon. And we tend to approach our faith as if our *actions* are more important than God's *character*. But what if, instead, we based our faith and actions on God as he really is—a loving Father who sacrificed his only Son to save us from our sin.

That's what this book is about.

Sometimes, to grow in our understanding of God, it's helpful to view him in *contrast*, to consider what he is *not* like. That's the approach we'll take here. Specifically, we will compare Christianity with the pagan context that surrounded the early church and discover how—even today—many Christians tend to view God the same way the ancient pagans viewed their deities.

We don't *intend* to treat the God of the universe like just

another god—thus the “accidental” part of *Accidental Pagans*—but the result is the same: We live in fear instead of freedom.

Ancient paganism was saturated with fear. Consider what the apostle Paul found when he first brought the gospel to Athens, the intellectual heart of the Roman Empire. In a city full of temples and statues, Paul made a revealing discovery: an altar devoted to an unknown god. Apparently the people were so afraid of offending the gods that they created an altar to any deity they might have missed—just to cover their bases.

After he had spent some time there, Paul was invited to address the city’s cultural elites. He opened with these words:

People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

ACTS 17:22-23, NIV

As strange as all this might seem to us in the twenty-first century, we’re often not much different. Our faith is consumed with worry that we might somehow offend the God we wish we understood better. Our prayer lives and our spiritual impulses reveal that we sometimes think of God as aloof, unpredictable, or stingy, and that he is only concerned with certain areas of our lives. But this is not the type of God we find revealed in Scripture or in the life of Christ. A fear-driven faith sounds more like ancient paganism, the religious environment Paul found in Athens and other cities throughout the Roman Empire.

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Before we go any further, it's important that I define my terms. When I use the word *pagan*, I am referring primarily to *ancient polytheists*. *Pagan* does not necessarily mean *immoral*. So when I say that many Christians today are “accidental pagans,” I don't mean they have stumbled into immorality (though some certainly may have). Instead, I simply mean they inadvertently treat God like the ancients treated their pantheon of gods, as if the God of the Bible were like Zeus, Poseidon, or Hades. Most of the examples I'll use come from Greek mythology, but I'll also touch on a few myths from other cultures.

It's impossible to neatly summarize all the variations of ancient paganism, but here are some basic contours:

- ✧ There were many gods, all with their own special interests.
- ✧ The gods had different levels and spheres of power.
- ✧ The gods were impulsive and unpredictable.<sup>1</sup>
- ✧ The gods were not paragons of virtue.<sup>2</sup>
- ✧ One's beliefs about the gods mattered less than one's actions to show proper reverence.<sup>3</sup>

In fear-driven ancient paganism, the people had no assurance that the gods were trustworthy. They didn't know the gods, couldn't understand them, couldn't rely on them, and couldn't predict where they'd show up, what they would do—or why. All of life seemed to be a test. The gods were puzzlingly cruel to humans and to each other, which of course made their worshipers afraid. People felt they had to trick or coerce these often unscrupulous deities to be on their side—yet never really knew if they were.

How often do we, as Christians, live like this? Saying we trust God but relying more on our own wits and wisdom. Puzzling

over God's will for our lives—which can seem hidden and hard to understand. Agonizing over the exact wording of our prayers to induce our distant, unpredictable God to respond in a certain way. Trying to do all the right things so he will be impressed enough to side with us. This mistaken viewpoint is so common that we may not even realize we think of God this way. For many, it is their default assumption about God, like a pre-installed spiritual software.

But we must dismantle and unlearn this fear-driven, accidental paganism, and replace it with a true understanding of who God is and what he is like.

I remember having a distorted picture of God during a formative period of my life, though I was unaware of it at the time. Back then, I wouldn't have said I was *afraid* of God. I thought I was being diligent about my faith and feeling some normal anxiety about the future.

This happened at the end of high school, as I began facing the prospect of a future outside of my parents' home. My life at that moment felt like a giant pass/fail exam, with God as the great test-giver in the sky. I agonized over what he would do if I didn't find his exact path—his perfect will for my life—and follow it. What if I went to the wrong college, picked the wrong job, or somehow failed to notice my future wife when God sent her strolling past me on the sidewalk? What if I wasn't consistent enough with my quiet times? What if I didn't pray about the right things, or pray often enough?

In my desire to follow God seriously, I felt I needed to pay very close attention to what he wanted from me so I wouldn't go astray. I thought I was simply being vigilant, responsible, demonstrating wisdom, and maybe even showing a bit of maturity. Perhaps

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I was, to some extent, but in retrospect I realize I went too far. I was operating on the basis of fear—fear of disappointing God and missing out on his best plan for me—and I didn't even know it.

How had I come to think of God and my life in this way? I had grown up in a healthy, Bible-based, gospel-centered church. My parents modeled Christlikeness and exemplified a trust in God. I should have known better than to be afraid of him. I entered young adulthood with not only the normal apprehensions of that age, but also with an unwanted stowaway: an accidentally pagan perspective of God. I was living in fear, in a story that wasn't rooted in God's unconditional love for me.

Another pivotal time that I can recall feeling afraid of God was when I first arrived at seminary, embarking on a time of study and preparation for whatever career God had in mind for me. When I attended a chapel service and looked around the room at the other students, I noticed quite a few were raising their hands in worship—something that wasn't part of my spiritual background. Perceiving their worship style as more passionate and freer than my own, I began to worry that I might not be as mature in my faith as my new classmates.

I've always known that I'm an introvert and less expressive in my relationships in general. But what did that say about my relationship with God? If I really loved him, wouldn't I be more obviously and outwardly passionate? Why did others seem more overwhelmed by God's love? Was I missing something? Was I faking the depth of my faith? Did God see me as a fake? What would he do if I didn't measure up? I had felt a similar anxiety over the years in other worship environments.

I was unsettled enough that I wanted to find someone to help me understand what I was feeling, so I scheduled a meeting with

my advisor, a well-known theology professor. We didn't know each other—I had just arrived on campus and hadn't even taken my first class yet—but he was gracious enough to meet with me.

I shared that, after what I had observed about my new classmates in chapel, I felt somewhat inferior to the other students. I wondered if I didn't have enough passion in my life of faith.

He replied to the effect of, "Well, you moved across the country to go to seminary, didn't you?"

Good point.

Then my advisor told me something life-giving that I will never forget. He said, "Ryan, God made you the way you are, with the social temperament you have. He didn't make a mistake. You probably won't relate to God in ways that significantly depart from how you interact with other people you care about, and that's okay."

I realized in that moment that I had been afraid of God, anxious that he was disappointed in me and unsure of what he would do about it. Would he punish me for my shortcomings, or withhold certain blessings from my life? I had been quietly haunted by these sorts of fears for most of my growing-up years.

I felt such palpable relief after that conversation with my advisor. It was like when a noisy fan suddenly switches off and you feel the peace of silence. You weren't aware of the background noise and how it was subtly irritating you, but you felt relief when it was silenced. That's how I felt. Fear was the background noise I didn't realize was there until it switched off. The freedom that flowed from that conversation has stayed with me for nearly two decades now.

In my years as a pastor, I have found that many believers live in a constant state of anxiety, worry, even dread. Just like in ancient paganism, a low-grade fear quietly coils around their hearts,

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constricting their freedom in Christ and stealing their joy. This has become plain to me through countless conversations with Christians of many backgrounds. Often, when someone comes to me because they're struggling with an aspect of their spiritual life, we discover some kind of fear they're responding to underneath the turmoil. When we excavate a little deeper, it becomes clear they're afraid not only of their circumstances, but of God himself and what he might do to them.

I've also found that many of these otherwise normal Christians are unaware of how much this fear drives them. I know *I* was. This is partly because fear effectively disguises itself as other things. We think we're simply being attentive to God's holiness. Or wise in our pursuit of his will. Or devoted to his purpose in our lives. Or organized. Or discerning. Or proactive. There's probably an element of truth in all of that, but sometimes those outward expressions of faith are defense mechanisms against an inner fear. We're trying to do all the right things to stay on God's good side and persuade him not to ignore us or interfere in our lives in unwelcome ways.

Don't get me wrong. Fear is a normal and healthy human emotion. It activates us in times of danger. It helps to keep us safe and secure. Fear of God in the traditional sense—that is, having a sense of awe or reverence toward him—is good, beneficial, and biblical. But being *afraid* of God is a feeling we're not meant to live with. This kind of fear goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. Born out of a lack of trust, it is the very fear that Christ came to set us free from.

When Satan appeared as a serpent in the garden of Eden, he tried—successfully—to convince Adam and Eve that God was untrustworthy. The real reason they couldn't eat the fruit of a

certain tree, according to Satan, was that “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, Satan implied that God was withholding something good from humanity; that God wasn’t looking out for humanity’s best interests; that he had some kind of hidden agenda. In his dealings with Adam and Eve, Satan’s tactic was to erode their trust in their creator. This lack of trust led to the original sin, which sparked the original fear:

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. Then the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He replied, “I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.”

GENESIS 3:8-10, NLT

This is the first mention of fear in Scripture. Humanity, as a consequence of sin, became afraid of God. We were never meant to feel this way about him, but sadly many of us do. If we’re not careful, fear can creep into our lives of faith, and our understanding of what God is like can begin to depart from the truth. We may be more afraid of God than we realize, but we don’t have to live that way. Jesus came to earth and willingly gave his life to rescue us and to prove how loved we are—to open the door to a genuine and life-giving relationship so we can know and trust God and be known by him. As Jesus’ beloved disciple John put it, “Love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear” (1 John 4:18, NLT).

On Paul’s first missionary journey, he passed through the interior of Asia Minor. When he and Barnabas arrived in a town called

## INTRODUCTION

Lystra and performed a miracle there, the pagan worshipers in the town went nuts:

When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in their local dialect, “These men are gods in human form!” They decided that Barnabas was the Greek god Zeus and that Paul was Hermes, since he was the chief speaker. Now the temple of Zeus was located just outside the town. So the priest of the temple and the crowd brought bulls and wreaths of flowers to the town gates, and they prepared to offer sacrifices to the apostles.

ACTS 14:11-13, NLT

Why would the citizens of Lystra react this way? It’s likely they had heard the pagan myth of Philemon and Baucis, in which Zeus and Hermes, disguised as mortal men, were traveling through the hill country of Phrygia (also in Asia Minor), seeking a place to rest.<sup>5</sup> The two gods visited a thousand homes, but at each one they were turned away—a fatal mistake the Lystrans had no intention of repeating when they met Paul and Barnabas in the Acts 14 account.

In the myth, Zeus and Hermes finally came to a humble cottage, thatched with straw and reeds, situated along the edge of a marsh, the home of an elderly couple named Philemon and Baucis. Though impoverished and diminished by age, the couple were living out their days with a contented spirit.

When the cloaked gods came to the door, Philemon invited them in and set about making a place for them to sit. Baucis revived the smoldering cooking fire, put a kettle to boil, and chopped a head of cabbage from the garden. Once the two men were situated,

Philemon took a forked stick and retrieved a slab of smoked bacon from the blackened beams overhead. Slicing off a small piece of the precious pork, he added it to the boiling water.

As the gods reclined on a well-worn willow couch, the old woman, with trembling hands, set the table with a light fare served in earthen dishes, and a jug of wine of no great vintage.

As the meal progressed, with lively conversation and an aura of goodwill, Philemon and Baucis began to notice that the food bowl kept filling of its own accord. Likewise, the wine jug was always brimming. They observed this strange phenomenon with a combination of fear and amazement.

“We are gods,” the two visitors said at last, “and this wicked neighborhood shall be punished as it deserves. You alone shall be spared the consequences. Now come with us to the top of this mountain.”

Leaning on their walking sticks and struggling mightily, Philemon and Baucis followed the two gods up the long, steep slope. Just below the summit, they looked back and saw the entire valley covered with water. Only their own home remained unscathed.

While they marveled at this sight and grieved the fate of their neighbors with tears, they saw their rustic cabin transformed into a stunning marble temple with richly carved columns and a golden roof.

“Now ask of us,” said Zeus, “whatever you desire, for you have shown yourselves worthy.”

After a brief consultation, Philemon and Baucis replied, “Let us be your priests and attend to your temple; and because we have been constant companions from our youth, allow us to die together when our time comes, so one will not have to suffer the agony of burying the other.”

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“It shall be as you have said,” Zeus assured them as he and Hermes prepared to depart.

And so it was. The faithful couple cared for the temple for many years. Then, one day, as they were standing outside together, Baucis noticed a leaf resting on her husband’s shoulder and tried to brush it away, only to discover it was attached. As more leaves began to appear all over his body, Philemon observed the same thing happening to his wife. Then branches began sprouting from the tops of their heads. Though they were afraid, they couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all.

Finally, as they were saying “I love you” one last time, bark closed over their mouths and silenced their lips. Their metamorphosis was complete. The gods had granted their request, though in a manner they never would have expected. It is said those two trees can still be found on a hillside somewhere in the region of Phrygia.

Being familiar with this story, the citizens of Lystra would have remembered what happened to the poor drowned souls who failed to show proper respect and hospitality to the gods in disguise. Their fear of destruction may have been what drove them to worship Paul and Barnabas.

Paul, of course, tried to stop them:

Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them.

ACTS 14:15, NLT

## ACCIDENTAL PAGANS

In the pages that follow, let's discover together the worthless things lurking in our lives of faith and learn how to worship the God who loves us, who sacrificed his only begotten Son for us. Let's uncover the fear-driven, pagan-like elements in our spiritual lives and replace that fear with the peace and freedom we find in Jesus Christ. We can't do this in our own strength, so let's pray for God's help as we begin this journey together.

*Dear Lord, we don't want to be accidental pagans. We always want to approach you with the awe and reverence you deserve. Please help us to uncover the ways in which we don't trust you, and free us from unnecessary fear. We want to grow closer to you, Lord, and we recognize that fear and misunderstanding can stand in the way. But perfect love drives out fear, as your Word says. Please allow your perfect love for us to replace whatever fear is lurking in our hearts. We know that Jesus paid the highest price to give us peace and security in your presence. We thank you and praise you for that. Amen.*

# WHEN WAS GOD CREATED?



In the beginning there wasn't a god to be found. That's how the ancient Greeks imagined the origin of the world. The best-known description of creation from ancient Greece is Hesiod's *Theogony*, a title that means "birth of the gods" or "the gods' genealogy." Hesiod lived in the seventh or eighth century BC, around the time of Homer and the biblical prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah.<sup>1</sup> The Greek origin story that Hesiod told went something like this:

There was only chaos at the beginning—a shadowy, frightening void. The gods began to emerge one by one as component parts of creation. First was Gaia (the Earth), and then Tartarus (the underworld). Uranus (the sky) came next. Gaia got together with Uranus, leading to a second generation of gods, nicknamed the Titans. Uranus was jealous of his offspring and afraid they

would find a way to oust him, so he attempted to keep his children locked up. One of these Titan children, Kronos, schemed with his mother, Gaia, to get back at his paranoid father.

When the time was right, Kronos attacked Uranus in a shockingly violent assault. (I'll spare you the gruesome details.) After seizing control, Kronos impregnated his sister Rhea, and they bore the next generation of gods, whose names you might recognize: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus. But like his father before him, Kronos grew paranoid that his children would stage a coup. Intent on keeping his kingship, Kronos swallowed his children as each was born. (Being immortal, they didn't die in their father's gut, but they were trapped.) Distressed by what was happening to her children, Rhea found a way to hide one of them—Zeus—on the island of Crete. She wrapped a stone in cloth and fed it to Kronos, who quickly swallowed the rock thinking he was ingesting Zeus. Kronos was certain he had safely imprisoned his offspring where they could not threaten his throne.

Eventually, Zeus and his siblings, who came to be known as the Olympians because they resided on Mount Olympus, liberated themselves and went to war against their father, Kronos, and the other Titans from the previous generation. Under Zeus's leadership, the Olympians emerged victorious. The Titans were imprisoned in the underworld, and the Olympians, with Zeus as their king, began their reign.

There's more to the myth, but this quick summary is enough to give us a sense of how the ancient Greeks envisioned the origin of the world and their gods. Just as the beginning of any story signals the kind of story it will be, the origin story of the Greek gods told the people of the time that their lives would be marked

by chaos, paranoia, and conflict. This was true not only for the Greeks, but also for the Romans and the pagan societies of ancient Canaan and Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

Looking past the morally dreadful parts of Hesiod's tale, which we will revisit in a later chapter, let's focus on the single most important aspect of the pagan gods' origin story: There was a time when they did not exist.

### **The Ancient Pagans' Perspective: The Gods Are Created Beings**

If the gods were born, as indicated in the title of Hesiod's work—*Theogony*, or *Birth of the Gods*—it means there was a time when they did not exist. Embedded in this single fact are several key insights.

First, the pagan deities did not create the universe. It was there before they arrived. In the Greek myths, the primordial gods, such as Gaia and Uranus, came into being while creation was still under construction, but the cosmos itself was older than they were, and perhaps eternal.<sup>3</sup> Also, these created gods were not all-powerful or all-knowing—as evidenced by their ongoing fight for control of a universe they didn't create and their propensity for tricking each other or being duped themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Further, the lives of the gods were governed by a nebulous set of higher powers. There was a sense of destiny in ancient Greek paganism, a belief that the universe had issued a blueprint that must be followed in the life of each created being. In Greek mythology, the divine embodiment of this destiny was a trio of deities called the Fates, who made it their business to ensure people's lives followed the plan. Even the gods seemed to be subject to the power of destiny and the enforcement of it by the Fates.<sup>5</sup> The idea that

even the gods weren't the most powerful force in the universe is woven throughout the ancient myths.

The ancients believed the gods were real and that they were very powerful, but they also understood there were hidden, lurking forces that were deeper, older, and perhaps more commanding than the gods. Who created the universe if not the gods? What would happen if the Titans, the gods who were imprisoned in the underworld, ever escaped? What if people began to wander away from their destiny? How would the Fates intervene? In the context of chaos and paranoid conflict, this was the landscape of fear that sprang from the belief that the gods hadn't always existed and were outranked by other mysterious and unpredictable powers.

## **The Accidental Pagans' Fear: God Is Not All-Powerful**

If God did not always exist, it would mean that someone or something more powerful created him. Thus, he would not be all-powerful. And if God were not all-powerful, we could not be certain what would happen. Fear of the unknown is a universal human fear, one to which even well-meaning Christians fall prey. We say we believe in God and profess that he is Lord of the universe and Lord of our lives, but when we see the storm raging around us and consider our often-disorienting circumstances, we easily become fearful and apprehensive about God's ability to protect and save us.

So we always have a plan B. We trust God, but watch our backs. We pray as if it all depends on God, but act as if it all depends on us. Behind all our contingency plans are questions that reveal our lack of real trust in God and his abilities. What

can God really do in *my* situation? Is he strong enough to repair my marriage? Is he powerful enough to heal my sick child? What about the painful divisions in my church family?

Beyond that, what *will* he do? What am I hoping for that he might fail to do? What if he's not powerful enough to fix my situation, or concerned enough to even notice what's going on in my life? Or is God so disappointed with me that I must rely on my own skills, wisdom, and resources to navigate the turbulent waters ahead?

We've all had moments and seasons like that, and we typically respond by grasping for greater control of our circumstances, hoping to snuff out any chaos or uncertainty in our lives. But when we behave like this, it reveals that we don't really trust in God's power. We don't really believe he has complete control of our circumstances, or we don't trust him to use his power in our lives. So instead we trust in our own wisdom, power, and ability.

Fears like these are common and understandable, but they're unwarranted, based on who God actually is. He is not a pagan deity, outranked by nebulous powers or outflanked by competitors. He is the eternal creator of everything that exists, and his power is unsurpassed.

### **The Truth That Sets Us Free: God Is Eternal and All-Powerful**

God exists eternally. That is, there has never been a time when he did not exist, and there is nothing—no pain, no trouble, no circumstance—beyond his sovereign power and providential hand. God has no fear of the unknown, because there is nothing unknown to him.

In contrast to Hesiod's chaotic origin story, consider afresh the

very first verse in the Bible and everything it tells us about God's nature and the type of story we're living in:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.  
The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered  
the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over  
the surface of the waters.

**GENESIS 1:1-2, NLT**

Creation began not with chaos, but with God in full control of the process. God did not come crashing into existence through unnamed forces beyond and before him. There is nothing older or more powerful than God. He is the one who created the heavens and the earth. He started it all. At first there was nothing, and then there was something, all because of God's unmatched creative power. The God of the Bible is the uncreated Creator. The story of his creation stands in stark contrast to the pagan myths. Consider the next few verses of Genesis:

God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness "night."

And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.

**GENESIS 1:3-5, NLT**

There was indeed a formless emptiness at the beginning, but unlike the chaos depicted in Greek mythology, that void was

simply God's blank canvas. It's a restful picture of a work in progress, with the great artist painting his masterpiece, bringing order and purpose to the universe as he speaks it into existence.

No chaos. No conflict. No fear about the untamed nature of creation. Everything is safely in the hands of God, who was bringing his vision for creation into being, step by step. Genesis presents a fundamentally different vision than that depicted in Hesiod's *Theogony*, as well as in other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts that feature a struggle for power at the outset of creation.<sup>6</sup> Biblical scholar Tremper Longman succinctly articulates the key difference between Genesis and the ancient Near Eastern pagan myths: "Yahweh created the cosmos! . . . The biblical account presents one God, who alone is God, who created the world. This one God created unopposed."<sup>7</sup>

This vision of God as the ultimate Creator is picked up in the poetic reflections of the Psalms, whose composers had a clear sense of God's nature and the story we are living in. Words fail us when we try to describe the infinite. We tend to think of eternity as being about the future, but it also includes what we think of as the past. The words *backward* and *forward* have no meaning when speaking of the eternal God. He is eternal in both directions. In Psalm 90, the psalmist explores this, looking everlastingly backward and forward in time, to imagine the power and grandeur of our uncreated Creator:

Before the mountains were born  
or you brought forth the whole world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

PSALM 90:2, NIV

In one of his most celebrated psalms, David considers God's nature as creator and what it means for our relationship with him:

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—  
the moon and the stars you set in place—  
what are mere mortals that you should think about them,  
human beings that you should care for them?

PSALM 8:3-4, NLT

The fact that God created everything, and never had a beginning, isn't merely interesting information about his lifespan. It ought to be at the very root of our relationship with him. David understood this. When we consider the wonders of God's creation—the northern lights, the hauntingly luminescent creatures at the bottom of the ocean, a mountain river that never stops flowing, glittery nebulae floating across the galaxy—how is it that we, as ordinary and earthbound as we are, matter so much to God?

When we face trouble in this life, as we all do, we must remember the dimensions of the story we're in. It began with our uncreated Creator bringing the universe into existence exactly like he wanted to, with no chaos, no peers, and no rivals. And Jesus, the eternal Son, was there at the beginning as well. When he came to earth in the flesh, that was a new chapter of his existence, but Jesus was not *created* when he arrived in Bethlehem. He had always existed, as Paul masterfully explains at the beginning of his letter to the Colossians:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.

He existed before anything was created and is supreme  
over all creation,

## WHEN WAS GOD CREATED?

for through him God created everything  
in the heavenly realms and on earth.  
He made the things we can see  
and the things we can't see—  
such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the  
unseen world.  
Everything was created through him and for him.  
He existed before anything else,  
and he holds all creation together.

COLOSSIANS 1:15-17, NLT

Jesus, our Lord and Savior (and Creator), is not the originator of our fears, unlike the pagan gods who were often a source of paranoid uncertainty for ancient worshippers. Our Savior and Creator is before all things, including our fears and misunderstandings. No matter how chaotic our lives feel, and regardless of how bleak world affairs become, Jesus holds all things together. We're living in *his* story, and it's a story with a good beginning and an ending that is even better—beyond our wildest imagination.

When the Israelites were struggling to understand how God could allow his people to be menaced by Mesopotamian armies, the prophet Isaiah reminded them about the eternal nature of their God and how they could trust him even in the darkest times:

Have you never heard?  
Have you never understood?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of all the earth.  
He never grows weak or weary.  
No one can measure the depths of his understanding.

He gives power to the weak  
and strength to the powerless.  
Even youths will become weak and tired,  
and young men will fall in exhaustion.  
But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.  
They will soar high on wings like eagles.  
They will run and not grow weary.  
They will walk and not faint.

ISAIAH 40:28-31, NLT

When Jerusalem was destroyed by pagan armies, the author of Lamentations remembered who God is and the good story he is writing.

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23, NIV

These are the Spirit-inspired words of someone who understood the beginning of the story and trusted the eternal God who authored it. He knew that, one way or another, God would put everything right. The God who made everything has the power to renew, restore, and remake anything or anyone. And this is exactly what has happened through Jesus Christ, what is happening today by the Holy Spirit, and what will happen one day at the end of history as we know it. As the apostle John put it, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever" (Revelation 21:4, NLT).

In paganism, the gods are created beings. If we believe something like that about God—that he was created—it leads to the fear that he is not all-powerful. But the truth that sets us free is that God never came into being. He is eternal and all-powerful, and our lives are safe in his hands.

### **Overcoming Our Accidental Paganism**

Sometimes, our view of God becomes too small. If we don't recognize that he is eternal, uncreated, and unrivaled, then we will fear that he is not all-powerful—and fear of the unknown will infuse our lives. When we enthrone our changing circumstances and try to grab on to whatever control we can find, we will always come up short.

But the truth is that there is no power in the universe or in our lives that eclipses God's power. Nothing is ever out of his hands.

When you feel fear of the unknown, of being out of control, or you wonder whether God is up to the task of facing whatever troubles have come your way, let *prayer* be your first instinct. Ask for God's help, not only with your situation, but also with how you think about him. Ask the Holy Spirit to cultivate a right-sized view of God in your heart. Recognize that in relying on your own strength, you shrink God down to a pagan-sized imitation that is far from true. Instead, rely on the Lord and ask him to help you trust him—the one who is good, everlasting, and all-powerful. Knowing God as he truly is will help ease your fears of the unknown.

Here's an exercise you can try to help put things into perspective. Take a piece of paper, turn it sideways, and draw a one-inch horizontal line in the center of it. Put two small vertical lines on each end of it, like brackets. Under the horizontal line, write "my

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life.” This is a tiny timeline of your life on earth. Above that short line, draw a randomly zigzagging, up-and-down line graph. This represents your ever-changing circumstances, the highs and lows that play out across your lifespan.



Now draw a long horizontal line extending to the right and left of your little line, all the way to the edges of the page. Write “God” at both ends of the line, and above and below your life line.



As Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last” (Revelation 1:17, NLT). This image will help you remember that God has always existed and will always exist, and there is no high or low in your life apart from his loving presence.