

# The Great Ideas of God and Man



Online Discussion Class



Tree of Life School

2023-2024

Introduction, Schedule, and Exercises

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## The Study of the Great Ideas in the Great Books

### Introduction

A good education should include an opportunity for students to wrestle with some of the weighty questions that come with living. Who am I? Why am I here? Is there a God? Who is He? What does He require of me? What is valuable or worthwhile? What are the principles of right and wrong? For centuries great thinkers have proposed answers to these and other questions. The implications of their answers are all around us. We call it culture and Western Civilisation as it exists is a veritable cornucopia of competing worldviews – all of them out to get control of our minds and to move us to live as becomes a disciple of their way.

Surely, ideas have consequences. They do not exist in a vacuum. As one thinks, so he is. There can be little disagreement that the study of ideas is important. However, there are probably more than 400 basic ideas to explore and discuss. To look at them all would be to take the proverbial route that is a mile wide and an inch deep. Therefore, we have sought to help students understand what might be considered the most foundational of all these ideas: God and Man; Truth and Lies; Goodness and Evil; Beauty and Ethics. The order of the studies is significant as it follows, more or less, the progression of the Trivium; that is, grammar level understanding (God and Man) to rhetorical application in a look at what constitutes beauty and ethical living. Upon completion our hope is that students will be able to articulate that an understanding of truth, for example, significantly impacts the idea of what is good or even what is beautiful. Further an understanding of what is good will affect the view of what is right and wrong; what is just; what is freedom; what is equality. The connectedness goes on and on, becoming for the student his or her worldview; that is, how they will live in this present age.

In 2003 we launched our first level of *Tree of Life's Study of the Great Ideas Through the Great Books*. *The Study of the Ideas of God and Man* has proved to be challenging and stimulating for many students. In 2004 we introduced our second level: *The Study of the Ideas of Truth and Lies*, exploring some core questions that arise when young people begin to read critically. 2005 saw the addition of *The Study of the Ideas of Good and Evil*. Our four year study of the Great Ideas was rounded out with the completion of *The Study of the Ideas of Beauty and Ethics*. Later in 2012, we introduced an online, discussion-based version of the course allowing students to interact together. This popular option has been improved each year over the last few years. However, as students who have gone through every level have discovered, their wrestling with the Great Ideas has only begun. Enjoy the journey!

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## The Study of the Ideas of God and Man

*Does God exist?*

*If so, who is He?*

*If He can be known, how can I know Him?*

*What does He require of me?*

To affirm or deny the existence of God carries with it more consequences for thought and action than any other question one can ask. Because of the extreme importance of this topic, no Great Books study would be complete without an exploration of it.

As you work through the material in this course, you will consider the views of a number of authors who lived in a variety of cultures at different times in history. Your conclusion to the primary question of God's existence as well as issues that naturally follow: the question of divine nature and the relation of the world/man to the gods/God will profoundly influence your conception of the world in which you live, the position you occupy in it, and the life to which you are called.

Whether you and others consider man to be the supreme being of the universe, equal to all other "things" on the earth, or subservient to a superior being, will surely shape your worldview. For example, if God does exist, you need to conclude whether He is to be feared or loved. Is He to be defied or obeyed? Is He merely a concept in your mind or is He personal?

Whether you exclude or embrace a divine being will practically influence your view of man and the world around you. While we have not specifically focussed on the idea of man in this course, it follows naturally that what you learn and come to believe about the questions that surround a study of God, will shape your understanding and actions related to man and the world. Keep this in mind as you study this year. Simply put the more we know of God, the more we know of ourselves and our responsibility in life and eternity.

In a very real sense a study of the idea of God could begin and end with the Bible. Without a doubt it has been the most influential book ever written. Whether you believe it is the inspired, infallible Word of God or merely a good example of early literature, you cannot deny that the ideas contained in the Bible, more than any other book, have shaped the way western culture has developed.

In the Bible we see essentially all the ideas about God or the gods that man could ever conceive. In some way or another God has illustrated the consequences of embracing paganism, heathenism, Gnosticism, and other isms. He has also shown the great comfort from following in The Way.

Over the years great men and women have written on the enduring themes that are laid out for us in Scripture. In no way does this course make the assertion that any of the Great Books are part of the Canon. However, what these people have to say can and should help us understand the Truth,

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Goodness, and Beauty that accompanies a right understanding of who God is, how we can know Him, and what He requires of us.

To establish the boundaries for our discussion, we will start with a basic assumption: God either exists or He doesn't. On one side you have someone like John Calvin who, in his famous Institutes of the Christian Religion, said,

“That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God Himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of His Godhead...that all men...may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service...”

On the other side of the coin you have someone like Nietzsche who said, “God is dead...or, if he exists...he seems incapable of making himself understood.”

Between these two divergent positions we have everything from “soup to nuts”. The Greeks and Romans were polytheistic in their practice of religion. It has been said that together they worshipped over 36,000 deities of one form or another. Some of these gods they even saw as personal in nature. Many saw the gods as glorified super heroes. In Edith Hamilton's Mythology the pagan gods of the Greeks, Romans, and Norse are seen for all their fickleness. They had a beginning, change character like New England weather, and, other than their immortality and great powers, were little different from the man in the street. For more extensive evidence of this the student will want to read Homer and Virgil, among others.

The ideas of deism and pantheism also find expression throughout the ages. While deism affirms that there is a god, it often sees him as some sort of absentee landlord, neither becoming involved nor caring much about what happens in the world. God does not govern, therefore he neither rewards or punishes. In turn he does not have to be feared or served. Later deists saw God as having laid down certain laws to govern all men yet this is not done through the interference of religion. Men like Rousseau and others who championed many ideas of the Enlightenment saw God in this light. Pantheists, on the other hand, were closer to atheists. They denied the existence of a transcendent, supernatural being or beings and saw God everywhere. In short God is Nature. A lot of poetry that we read contains this romantic view of God as being in the trees, flowers, clouds, etc.

While the deist rejects supernatural revelation, faith, and religion as being the work of reason, the agnostic makes the opposite denial. Nothing supernatural can be known by reason. It can neither be proved or disproved. The Gnostic stands against the agnostic and claims that reason can penetrate the divine mysteries. Of course there also exists people who have taken a stand on all points in between, attempting to harmonize faith and reason in pursuit of the knowledge of God.

The point of this whirlwind tour of some of the main views of the idea of God is to simply say that you will come into contact with them in your reading. It cannot be avoided. No attempt has been made to assign a Great Book for each school of thought concerning God. Instead the books were chosen to provide you with a broad view of how western culture came to understand who God is and what

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difference that makes. Some of the novels, short stories, and poems might better be classified as being about man, but, as was previously mentioned, no study of God can escape application to what this means to man. It is hoped that all of the selections will bring enjoyment to the reader.

However, it is ultimately hoped that by completing the requirements that follow, you will have a more comprehensive understanding of what God isn't, and, more importantly, that you will better know who He is; not just know about God, but know God as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word. May God direct and bless your studies.

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## How This Course Works

The format of this course brings together the homeschooling character of independent study with the benefits of student/teacher interaction in an online class. As a two-credit course, the Great Ideas of God and Man will demand much of students. There are a number of components to this course, some independent work and others interactive. At any given time, students will be reading from two or maybe three books, as well as working on several exercises. The weekly schedule provided in this guide is essential in following the course. It is the students' responsibility to stay on track with readings and exercises in order to get the most out of our study.

This course includes the following elements:

**Regular reading** forms the raw material for this course. Students will follow a reading schedule guiding them slowly through some of the longer, more classical books in this course as well as shorter pieces. This is a significant change from previous versions of the course, where long classical works would be read all at once over two or three weeks. Instead, students will now read one or two chapters of these books in instalments, once per week over the course of six to ten weeks. This is intended to allow for students to slowly digest the material as well as appreciate the ideas they are reading. Note that the total volume of reading in the course remains unchanged from before. Other books, including novels, stories, and poetry, will be read at a quicker pace. The reading becomes the subject of discussion classes and writing assignments.

**Discussion classes** will meet every 3 weeks on Tuesdays (dates and times announced online) and will cover both the ideas in the literature as well as some guidance on writing assignments. The discussions will follow a Socratic method (question and answer) and give the opportunity for students to think carefully and inquisitively. The classes are live webinars with audio and video from the teacher, and allowing for audio and text communication from students. Classes are recorded and available for viewing through the week for those missing a scheduled session. Students are required to attend all discussions unless there is a legitimate excuse. While there is an attendance/participation mark based on verbal participation, questions, contributions, and shared reading, the goal is to foster natural, comfortable interaction.

Before the discussion class, students can complete a short quiz (optional) based on their reading. Following the class, they complete a quick confirmation of having participated in the discussion class.

**Forum questions** are given during the weeks without discussion classes, allowing for additional student interaction and as a built-in progress check. Students are required to post a single answer with a specified length that addresses the question, but they are not marked on the detail of their ideas, writing quality, or forum commenting.

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**Reading guides and writing exercises** are used to help students narrate the content of their readings, process the ideas in the course, and to prepare for discussions and writing assignments. These are checked for completion at the end of the course.

**Formal writing assignments** are given throughout the course to develop students' thinking and practise writing skills. The writing assignments are both descriptive, analytical, and creative. Students will receive written or audio feedback on their writing with suggestions for improvement. The final extended essay of the course will be one that is assembled, edited, and improved in steps, and will represent their thinking on basic ideas of the course.

**Home discussion questions** are given for parents and students to talk at home about some of the ideas and applications coming from the course readings and to connect them to biblical teaching. **These are optional but recommended.** These questions give more opportunity to cover certain ideas, issues, and opinions than would be suitable for class discussion and in which there may be difference among Christians. Moreover, these questions are intended to maintain the homeschooling character in this online class. See page 136.

A personal **Great Ideas Notebook** may be kept by each student for recording ideas, quotations, questions, examples, impressions, facts, and dates from their study. This is an open-ended and private exercise that will span the entire Great Ideas course to help students develop the habit of thoughtful note-taking, and to gather material for their writing. This will be **optional but recommended** as a helpful exercise. At the end of the course, opportunity will be given to provide evidence of a Great Ideas Notebook for bonus points. See page 135 for ideas and suggestions.

## Evaluation Scheme

Submitted Writing Assignments / Essays	50%
Forum Discussions	20%
Class Participation / Followup	20%
Quizzes (optional)	0%
Completion of Reading and Notes (end of year mark)	10%
Great Ideas Notebook (optional - extra credit)	+5% max



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## Three Week Cycle of the Course

Week	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday/Thursday/Friday
1	Great Book reading	<b>Online Discussion Class</b>	Writing exercises, other reading
2	Great Book reading	respond to Forum Question	Writing exercises, other reading
3	Great Book reading	respond to Forum Question	<b>Assignment due <u>Saturday</u></b>

## Condensed Weekly Schedule

Week	Date	Monday - Great Book Reading	Tuesday - Online Class / Forum Question	Submitted Assignments	Other reading this week
1	Sept 5*	HTRAB 1-2	<b>Class 1 - Introduction, themes of God and Man</b>		Call of the Wild
2	11	HTRAB 3-4	Forum question		Call of the Wild
3	18	HTRAB 5 / Mythology intro	Forum question	<b>Theme Paragraph Call of the Wild due Sept. 23</b>	Yearling
4	25	Mythology ch. 1-2	<b>Class 2 - What does Mythology teach us?</b>		Yearling
5	Oct. 2	Mythology ch. 3-4	Forum question		Yearling
6	10	Mythology ch. 5-8	Forum question	<b>Essay on Yearling due Oct. 14</b>	Yearling
7	16	Mythology ch. 9-12	<b>Class 3 - Greek Heroism and fate</b>		
8	23	Mythology ch. 13-14	Forum question		Tell-Tale Heart
9	30	Mythology ch. 15-16	Forum question	<b>Mythology Essay <u>Outline</u> due Nov. 4</b>	What Men Live By
10	Nov. 6	Mythology ch. 17-19	<b>Class 4 - Mythology followup and intro to Plato</b>		Lottery Ticket
11	13	Socrates - Euthyphro	Forum question		Great Stone Face
12	20	Socrates - Phaedo I	Forum question	<b>Mythology Essay due Nov. 25 Short Story Quiz</b>	
13	27	Socrates - Phaedo II	<b>Class 5 - Plato's view of the soul versus Paul</b>		The Tiger and the Lady
14	Dec. 4	Bible readings	Forum question		
15	11	Bible readings	Forum question Halfway survey	<b>Bible Study Guide due Jan. 6</b>	Animal Farm

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16	Jan. 2	Confessions I	<b>Class 6 - Augustine intro</b>		A.F. / Forbidden City	
17	8	Confessions II	Forum question		Forbidden City	
18	15	Confessions III	Forum question	<b>Conflict / Resolution Essay due Jan. 20</b>		
19	22	Confessions IV	<b>Class 7 - Augustine and seeking worldly wisdom</b>		Poetry selections	
20	29	Confessions V	Forum question		Poetry selections	
21	Feb. 5	Confessions VI	Forum question	<b>Poetry Paragraphs due Feb. 10</b>	Poetry selections	
22	12	Confessions VII	<b>Class 8 - Neoplatonic quest, John 1</b>			
23	19	Confessions VIII	Forum question			
24	26	Confessions IX	Forum question	<b>Confessions essay <u>Draft</u> due Mar. 2</b>		
25	Mar. 4	Institutes 1-2	<b>Class 9 - Confessions followup...Institutes</b>		Robinson Crusoe	
	11	-----Break Week-----				
26	18	Institutes 3-5	Forum question		Robinson Crusoe	
27	25	Institutes 6-7	Forum question	<b>Confessions Essay revisions due Mar. 30</b>	Robinson Crusoe / Julius Caesar	
28	Apr. 1	Julius Caesar	<b>Class 10 - Julius Caesar and political corruption</b>		Robinson Crusoe	
29	8	Institutes 8-10	Forum question		Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde	
30	15	Institutes 11-12	Forum question	<b>Robinson Crusoe Essay due Apr. 20</b>	Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde	
31	22	Institutes 13	<b>Class 11 - The worldview of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</b>		Frankenstein	
32	29	Institutes 14	Forum question		Frankenstein	
33	May 6	Institutes 15	Forum question	<b><u>Outline</u> of Final Essay due May 11</b>	Frankenstein	
34	13	Institutes 16-17	<b>Class 12 - The worldview of Frankenstein; wrap up.</b>			
35	20	Institutes 18	Forum question: feedback/shared responses Final course survey	<b>Final Essay due June 22</b>		

\* indicates the scheduled work starts on a Tuesday due to a holiday on Monday.

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## Week 1

Monday	Read <i>How to Read a Book</i> : chapters 1-2	<input type="radio"/>
Tuesday	Online Class 1 @ _____	<input type="radio"/>
Exercises	Complete reading guide for ch. 1-2	<input type="radio"/>
	Read introduction to this Course	<input type="radio"/>
	Complete course survey	<input type="radio"/>
Other Reading	<i>Call of the Wild</i>	<input type="radio"/>

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### How to Read a Book Reading Guide for ch. 1-2

**Background:** It is fashionable these days to speak of reading the *Great Books*. You know the Great Books don't you? They're the "every thinking person wants to read; knows they should read; doesn't really know how to go about reading; can't understand them once they start, so they give up" kinds of books. These are the books with authors' names like Homer, Herodotus, Euclid, Virgil, St. Augustine, Luther, Shakespeare, Pascal, Rousseau, Melville, Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn. They are not all books with which we might agree. Quite frankly we would find ourselves disagreeing with much that they say. However, they are the books that have shaped Western culture. *The Republic, The City of God, The Prince, Don Quixote, Paradise Lost, Candide, Faust*, and, of course, *The Holy Bible*. We recognise the titles. We may even have lingered for varying periods of time within their pages. However, very few of us have read these books. I mean *really read* them.

Why? These books are not easy reading. They push us and tax our faculties. They do not let us take the easy way out. We would just as soon catch the movie or read the Readers' Digest version. But, we must not. We must learn how to read so that we can find out for ourselves what they say; what the authors of these classics are saying to us.

The authors of the text for this course are not so concerned about reading a lot of books. In fact, they agree with Thomas Hobbes when he said, "If I read as many books as most men do, I would be as dullwitted as they are." Mr. Hobbes, humility aside, touches on a key point to being a good reader. We too often equate good reading with the volume of books read or the speed with which they are read. No, good reading is more than that. **Good reading is when the author and reader meet and the reader understands what the author is teaching.** It seems like a simple task when put in simple words. But is it so easy?

What is good reading? What kinds of skills are needed to read the Great Books? Is it possible for someone like yourself to acquire these skills? What benefit can you hope to gain from your efforts?

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What kind of books should you be reading? Are there books that should be avoided? These and other questions are answered in *How to Read a Book*.

On April 8, 1933, William Lyon Phelps, American educator and author, delivered the following radio broadcast. In it he discusses the value of owning books. As you read it, I hope you catch a vision for reading - not just a score of novels or newspapers, or magazines, or other “earthly” compositions; for while these are suitable to inform and/or entertain us, they cannot often be classified as great books. No, it is hoped that you begin the lifelong process of reading books that teach you about the world and, more importantly, something about yourself. Read well - not in quantity, but in quality.

## **Owning Books** by William Lyon Phelps

(Taken from *The World's Greatest Speeches*, Copeland and Lamm editors) Dover Publications 1973

*The habit of reading is one of the greatest resources of mankind; and we enjoy reading good books that belong to us much more than if they are borrowed. A borrowed book is like a guest in the house; it must be treated with punctiliousness, with a certain considerate formality. You must see that it sustains no damage; it must not suffer while under your roof. You cannot leave it carelessly, you cannot mark in it, you cannot turn down the pages, you cannot use it familiarly. And then, some day, although this is seldom done, you really ought to return it.*

*But your own books belong to you; you treat them with that affectionate intimacy that annihilates formality. Books are for use, not for show; you should own no book that you are afraid to mark up, or afraid to place on a table, wide open and face down. A good reason for marking favourite passages in books is that this practice enables you to remember more easily the significant sayings, to refer to them quickly, and then in later years, it is like visiting a forest where you once blazed a trail. You have a pleasure of going over the old ground, and recalling both the intellectual scenery and your own earlier self.*

*Everyone should begin collecting a private library in youth; the instinct of private property, which is fundamental in human beings, can here be cultivated with every advantage and no evils. One should have one's own bookshelves, which should not have doors, glass windows or keys; they should be free and accessible to the hand as well as the eye. The best of mural decorations is books; they are more varied in colour and appearance than any wallpaper, they are more attractive in design, and they have the prime advantage of being separate personalities, so that if you sit alone in a room in the firelight, you are surrounded with intimate friends. The knowledge that they are there in plain view is both stimulating and refreshing. You do not have to read them all. Most of my indoor life is spent in a room containing six thousand books; and I have a stock answer to the invariable question that comes from strangers. “Have you read all of these books?” “Some of them twice.” This reply is both true and unexpected.*

*There are of course no friends like living, breathing, corporeal men and women; my devotion to reading has never made me a recluse. How could it? Books are of the people, by the people, for the people. Literature is the immortal part of history; it is the best and most enduring part of personality. But book-friends have this advantage over living friends; you can enjoy the most truly aristocratic society in the world whenever you want it. The great dead are beyond our physical reach, and the great living are usually almost as inaccessible; as for our personal friends and acquaintances, we cannot*

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*always see them. Perchance they are asleep, or away on a journey. But in a private library, you can at any moment converse with Socrates or Shakespeare or Carlyle or Dumas or Dickens or Shaw or Barrie or Galsworthy. And there is no doubt that in these books you see these men at their best. They wrote for you. They "laid themselves out," they did their ultimate best to entertain you, to make a favourable impression. You are necessary to them as an audience is to an actor; only instead of seeing them masked, you look into their inmost heart of heart.*

1. Why is good reading necessarily active?

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2. Explain how active reading is like being the catcher in baseball.

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3. List and explain the three goals of reading.

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4. Explain the basic difference between learning by instruction and learning by discovery as is relates to reading.

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5. Why is a book like an *absent teacher*?

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6. List and briefly explain the four levels of reading.

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## Week 2

Monday	Read <i>How to Read a Book</i> ch. 3-4	<input type="radio"/>
Tuesday	Respond to the Forum Question on the class site: <i>Why is literacy important for society? (Consider Judges 2:10, Ps. 78:4, Joel 1:3, 1 Chron. 12:32, Acts 17:11, 2 Kings 22:8-11.)</i>	<input type="radio"/>
Exercises	Complete the reading guide after Monday reading	<input type="radio"/>
	Inspectional Reading exercise	<input type="radio"/>
	Thesis statements practise	<input type="radio"/>
Other reading	<i>Call of the Wild</i> (finish)	<input type="radio"/>

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### Forum Question (Draft)