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Clear: 8 Lessons on the Theological Foundations of Faith
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PREFACE

Hi, my name is Chris. Even though I am older than you, married with three children, and at a different place in my spiritual journey—as we all are—you and I are quite alike. Among other reasons, we're alike because we're God's handiwork, created in God's image. God designed us for the purpose of worshipping him, and we're called to be an illustration of God's love and restoration that reveals his presence to a dark and broken world.

We're also a part of a global community of people who claim Jesus as their King while striving to live out their faith. We live out our faith by continuing to trust God more deeply each day, learning to abide in Jesus, and being devoted to do everything we can to obey God and live in his intended ways. The people around us know our faith as real when they see that our devotion to God and our love for the world are the most important elements in our lives.

This book is designed to help bring your faith into focus. It's intended to help you know who God is on a deeper level and discover for yourself what the Bible—or God's story—has to say about a variety of topics, including Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, sin, and a few others. This book was created to help you develop or strengthen your confidence and trust in God. And it's intended to be just one part of many in the process that helps you grapple with your faith.

Perhaps this book will help you when your faith feels complicated or difficult by assuring you that the God who sometimes permits life to be hard, who seems absent and unjust at times (during natural disasters, following a tragic death, when diagnosed with an incurable disease, and so on), and who allows questions to go unanswered is the *same* God who created you and me. And he's the same God who graciously and mercifully came to this earth in order to live with humans for a little more than three decades and then die in our place so we might live eternally with him in heaven.

You'll experience times in your life (or maybe you already have) when you'll feel as though your faith isn't real or doesn't "work" or isn't even worth pursuing. You may have questions that make you wonder if God is really out there, if Jesus is really God's Son, if being a part of the church is really worth it, and so on. Through this book, it's my desire to help give your faith a foundation that leaves room for any of the tough questions, doubt, and uncertainty you may have. You may even come to expect those moments.

Your doubts, questions, and uncertainties shouldn't scare you. In fact, they ought to cause you to love God even more, knowing that the answers to life's most difficult challenges, questions, and problems may never be found. God is a big God. If we had him all figured out and therefore didn't have questions about God and our faith, then he wouldn't be the mysterious God he is. God would also be much smaller in our minds and hearts.

Here's the deal: I want you to have a faith that rocks—a faith that deepens every day and is on display for the whole world to observe. I want you to experience God in ways that propel you to levels of love for him that you didn't even know were possible. I want you to develop a trust in God that cannot be shaken. I want you to be able to find the place of peace in your life when everything around you seems to be out of place and unsettling. I want you to find unspeakable joy in your pursuit of God.

In his book *Finding Faith: A Self-Discovery Guide for Your Spiritual Quest*, Brian McClaren uses the terms *simplicity*, *complexity*, *perplexity*, and *humility* in talking about faith. Ultimately, that's the faith I want for you—one that, while it might be simple at times and complicated and perplexing at others, in the end is a faith that leads you into the way of humility. It won't be simple or easy; the way of humility is a difficult place to find. And, to be honest, it's a place we frequently visit, rather than permanently live.

I believe this place of humility can only really be found if our faith foundation is strong enough to bear the load that comes with life. This way of humility is an approach to life that accepts

God as King, provokes us to surrender to him every day in every situation, and drives us to live a life of ongoing hope and conviction in God as our ruler.

I have three basic prayers for you. First, that this book will help you on your way to finding and following Jesus with a faith that's real and reliable. Second, that this book will be just one of the processes that helps you fall madly in love with God and that you'll be inspired to ready yourself for a life of pursuing God through other disciplines such as prayer, study, meditation, fasting, and so on. Third, that as you trek through the puzzling times of life, you'll remember the truths about God you read in this book and discover from God's Word, and be able to withstand the confusion that may come, gripping ever so tightly to a God who loves you and wants to have a brilliant relationship with you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I continue to be amazed by my wife, Gina. She lives out the theology in this book. Thanks, Gina, for your love, friendship, and support.

I am forever grateful for the influence that Dr. Floyd H. Barackman (1923–2007) had and continues to have in my life. He was a terrific writer, an excellent professor, a supportive mentor, and a wonderful human being. Much of what I've included in this book comes from the notes I took throughout my theology classes at Davis College where Dr. Barackman served faithfully for many years.

I would also like to personally thank the fine people at Kregel Publications for allowing me to use many ideas and thoughts taken from *Practical Christian Theology: Examining the Great Doctrines of the Faith*, © Copyright 2002 by Dr. Floyd Barackman. Published by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI. Used by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

I am deeply appreciative for the creative editorial work that my friend and ministry partner Tony Myles contributed to this book.

I am thankful to YouthFront, Inc., a wonderful community of people who support my writing activities and me as a coworker and friend.

INTRODUCTION

GETTING STARTED...

Before you dive into the following pages, I want to remind you of some key truths about our faith. As you read and interact with this book and your Bible, it's critical that you keep the following in mind.

First, You Were Created to Be You!

God knew what he was doing when he created you. You were meant to be you, I was meant to be me, and your parents and friends were meant to be who they are. Just take a look around you today and I'm sure you won't find anyone who's exactly like you. And that's the way God wants it. God wants us to be *us!* As you go through this book, I believe it's important that you not compare yourself and your spiritual status against that of anyone. You are you, and you'll only ever be you—and that's just what God wants!

Look, wherever you are on your spiritual journey today—it's okay. You might think, *But I barely know or care about God or spiritual things!* That's okay. What's *not* okay, however, is for followers of Jesus who claim God as King to stay in their current positions. God wants us to grow like a tree that's planted one day and years later is reaching toward the heavens. The whole time this tree stretches toward the heavens, it's growing! It may grow slowly, or it may grow rapidly. How quickly it grows isn't the point. The point is that it's *growing*. So remember—you are you, and it's okay to be where you are on your spiritual journey. But it's not okay to stop growing.

Second, You're a Key Part of God's Story!

You and I are valued parts of a continuing storyline—God's Storyline! Regardless of our uniqueness—actually, with our uniqueness in mind—God created us to be in relationship with

him. In addition to that personal relationship, God also intends for us to play a key role in his Story.

Within this Story of God, you and I play ourselves. I can't play you, you can't play me, and neither one of us can play anyone else in this Story. But we can, as individual characters who live in community with all of humanity, play several roles.

We play the role of treasured children of God whose primary purpose is to honor and glorify him with our whole lives. As members of God's family, we're called to live a life in pursuit of godliness. We also play the role of God's chosen influencers. God has chosen us to contribute to his mission! He's created us to be exactly who we are, and God wants us to use the many great gifts, skills, and talents he created in us as we fulfill his mission. Even though God knows our weaknesses, blemishes, and sinfulness, he still chose us to be characters in his great Story. We're God's partners, handpicked to help build his church by participating in a growing movement of disciples just like us who passionately desire to make more disciples.

Finally, we're designed to love. Like Jesus, we've been called to compassionately demonstrate the heart of God to all those around us.

Third, You're Just Beginning!

This book won't answer all of your questions. It won't teach you everything you need to know. It won't suffice as the only book you'll ever need to read about God. In fact, this book is barely going to scratch the surface! It *will* provide some foundational truths about God that may or may not make complete sense to you now, after you've finished reading it, or maybe ever. Hopefully, it will push you to ask more questions about your faith, not answer all the ones you already have. I want to prompt you toward pursuing more of who God is. Please don't be content with what you learn in this book. Keep pursuing God!

GOOD THEOLOGY

Part of what makes this book helpful is that it gives you an overview of what's called *theology*. Theology is the study of God, the Christian faith, and the relationship of God and faith played out in our everyday lives. Think of theology as a practical means to knowing God and how to live according to the mission God gives us. It's during the ongoing discovery of God that we can more deeply understand what God has done for all of humanity and how we can best give our lives to glorifying him.

As you read, you'll be working your way through a very orderly look at God and the Christian faith. Your consistent interactions with this book will help you discover and examine the following aspects of theology:

- God
- Jesus
- The Holy Spirit
- Humanity
- Sin
- Salvation
- Church
- Heaven

These aspects of theology can be found throughout the Bible, and they're simply an easy way to organize our ideas and thoughts about God. God isn't simple! In fact, I believe God cannot be completely understood.

Organizing theology, as I've done in this book—and as many people a lot smarter than I am have done for years—can be extremely helpful. It must be understood, however, that the Bible isn't best understood by dissecting it and compartmentalizing it. The Bible isn't solely a collection of stories *about* God; it's the *Story of God* that reveals who God is and how we're to live. God's Story is a story of his love for us and his desire for us to live in relationship with him and others.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book has been written in a way to help guide you in each of your interactions. We call them “interactions” rather than “lessons” because this isn’t about sitting down and reading something in order to gather information. It’s about a living, active interaction between you and God through this book, God’s Word, and various activities.

There are five sections within each interaction:

Consider—offers background and relevant information for each interaction.

Discover—assists you as you dig into the Bible and answer the questions.

Reflect—helps you review and recap the basic ideas found in each interaction. It will also provide moments of meditation and quiet as it leads you into the Pray section.

Pray—gives you a prayer or allows you to develop your own prayer that’s memorable and portable—a prayer that’s for along the way.

Immerse—helps you move from the head to the heart and hands. This section will help you immerse yourself in the lessons God is teaching you by giving you an opportunity to practice what you’re discovering each day. It will give you practical and relevant ways to express your theology in your everyday life.

After each chapter you’ll find a short summary of God’s Story. I’d like you to consider reading this summary after you’ve finished reading each chapter. I realize it may get a bit monotonous to do so every time, but it’s important to do your best to keep the truths that you’re learning about God in context. In other words, rather than picking verses that are scattered throughout the Bible in order to prove who God is or who Jesus is, it’s essential that

you remember that those verses have a greater context. That context is the overarching storyline of the Bible—God is in the process of restoring the world back to its original condition and intent.

Immediately following this Introduction, you'll find the summary that you'll read after each chapter. Go ahead and read it now and then answer the questions that follow. You may want to start a journal to record your answers after each chapter and see how your thoughts progress.

Remember...

Take your time as you go through each interaction. If it helps to do one interaction a day, then do one a day. If it helps to do one interaction a week, then do one a week. Find what works best for you. The best time of the day for you might be in the morning before school, or maybe it's during lunch, or maybe it's in the afternoon or evening. It doesn't matter when you interact. What matters is that you develop a rhythm of interacting with God and that rhythm brings about a healthy discipline and practice.

As you use this book as a tool to interact with God, God's Word, and God's mission, know that I'm praying for you. God bless you as you bring your faith into focus.

A Summary Narrative of the Bible

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

There are a variety of ways to see the panorama of God's Story. One is to look at God's Story as a series of episodes. An *episode* is a distinct event that's a part of a greater whole—like a chapter in a book or a scene from a movie. The following episodes will give us a big picture of God's Story and allow us to see more clearly God's desire to restore his relationship with us.



*The circle around the symbols represents a whole and complete relationship with God.

BIBLE SUMMARY NARRATIVE

This story begins as the Creator of all, God, was preparing the earth as a place for life. God filled the earth with plants and all kinds of creatures. The most special of these creatures were human beings formed in God's own likeness—in *God's image*.

God entrusted the humans to care for the earth and all of **creation**. God walked closely with them, showing them the best possible way to live. Under God's reign, the humans lived a life that was whole and complete.

In spite of this close relationship, the humans rebelled, choosing to live their own way over God's. Living outside of God's reign brought great consequences. Now **separated** from God, humans became subject to sickness, pain, and death.

Soon, humans spiraled out of control, acting out in selfishness and violence against one another. Determined to restore his creation, God chose a man named Abraham and his descendants to be a special **people**. God made a *covenant* with them, **promising**

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they would extend God's blessing and restoration to the entire world!

These special people, called the Israelites, were called to live differently, showing the world what it meant to live closely with God. God gave them a beautiful land where they enjoyed great blessings and grew into a large nation.

But it wasn't long before the Israelites chose to live their own way over God's. In their rebellion the Israelites encountered great struggles and became slaves of other nations. But God continued to give his people hope, promising to send a **rescuer** to break the power of their selfishness and rebellion.

Enter a man named Jesus. His life, teaching, and miracles all proved he was who he said he was: God's Son in human form—**God-with-us!** Jesus lived a remarkable life, always choosing to live God's way. He called people to follow him, inviting them to be a part of the "kingdom of God" and live under God's reign once again.

Jesus chose a surprising way to help humans be restored to God. Because Jesus lived perfectly, God allowed Jesus to become our substitute and take on the required punishment for all of humanity's rebellion. After suffering a brutal **death**, Jesus came **back to life** three days later and was seen by more than 500 eyewitnesses. The power of selfishness and rebellion was conquered once and for all!

Jesus challenged his followers to live as he did, and he sent God's Spirit to live inside them and empower them. This was the beginning of **the church**—a community of people across the globe who follow Jesus by living God's way and share in God's mission to restore the world.

This story continues with us. We're called to be the church—a new kind of community that'll show the world what it means to live in God's reign and return to the life we were created for.

The end of this amazing story lies ahead. Jesus promised to return to earth one day and bring about God's **new creation**. God's
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reign will come in fullness, restoring all things to the way God designed them. *Until then, may we live in God's ways, giving people a glimpse of what life is like in the coming kingdom.*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- As you read or listened to this narrative, what did you picture in your mind?
- What did this summary help you notice for the first time about God's Story?
- What do you think God's Story is ultimately about?
- How is it helpful to look at God's entire Story at once?
- How does this Story continue right now? How are we a part of it?



CHAPTER 1

GOD

Interaction 1: Who Is God?

CONSIDER

As people with a personal relationship with God, we have the honor of knowing the one true and living God. Although we can *know* God, we may never fully understand him. God is full of mystery, wonder, and awe.

God has given us special attention by providing some information about himself in the Bible. It's both our responsibility and our privilege to seek God and learn all that we can about him.

As we seek to know God, we must remember that we can learn only as much about God as he's revealed to us. Take a moment to read 1 Corinthians 2:9-10—"As it is written: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—these things God has prepared for those who love him'—for God has revealed them to us by his Spirit."

What has the Spirit revealed to you about God?

If you were asked to explain who God is to a friend or family member, what would you say to describe God?

DISCOVER

The following verses hint at the nature of God and will be helpful to your discovery throughout this interaction. Take a moment to look them up. Then read them slowly and attempt to uncover and absorb something new as it relates to the nature of God or who God is.

Old Testament**Exodus 3:13-14****Leviticus 11:44-45****Isaiah 44:6****Isaiah 45:22-24****Isaiah 46:9****New Testament****Romans 11:33-34****Ephesians 1:11****2 Timothy 2:13**

As you've read, the verses above indicate that God is a Person. And it's true that God exists as three distinct, simultaneous Persons (also known as the Trinity: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), each of whom is fully divine.

The fact that God has personal features or traits like ours indicates God's personhood. But while God is very much like us, we're very far from being like God. God is uncreated. He's without material body or substance; therefore, God is spirit.

Here's where it's important to recognize that there's a difference between the spirit of God and the Holy Spirit. The spirit that makes up God is an invisible force or power, while the Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is also invisible—but he's his own being.

REFLECT

Read the following verses (with emphasis added):

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only [Son], who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:18)

Christ is the visible image of the **invisible God**. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation. (Colossians 1:15, NLT)

It was by faith that Moses left the land of Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He kept right on going because he kept his eyes on the **one [God] who is invisible**. (Hebrews 11:27, NLT)

PRAY

As you conclude your learning for today, take a moment to write a prayer to God below. As you write, ponder the difference between God as a spirit and the Holy Spirit. If it helps you, use the following truths about God to guide your prayer.

God is a Person.
God is divine.
God is uncreated and invisible.
God is spirit.

IMMERSE

Take a moment to quiet your pace. If it helps, close your eyes and take two or three deep breaths. After you feel you've established a quiet pace, take a few minutes to write in the space provided as many truths about God as you can bring to mind from this interaction.

Interaction 2: What Is God Like?

CONSIDER

God has qualities that belong to him. These qualities or attributes of God allow us to better understand him. And a better understanding of God allows us to worship him more deeply. Throughout this interaction we'll study several of God's attributes and grow in our awareness, awe, and adoration of God.

Before we study God's attributes, however, I think it's constructive for us to pause and reflect on recent world events that cause us to be grateful for our union with God. What is it about our world that makes you thankful he's your God? List those things here:

DISCOVER

The following is a list of several of the most established attributes of God and their definitions. These attributes will help you understand what God is really like. Take a moment to look up the verse(s) beside each attribute.

Life (Jeremiah 10:10;
1 Thessalonians 1:9)

The quality of
being alive

Truthful (Psalm 19:7-11)

The quality of
being real

Immutability (Psalm 102:25-27)

The quality of
being unchanging

Eternal (Deuteronomy 33:27; Isaiah 57:15)	The quality of being infinite in duration
Infinity (Psalm 145:3, Matthew 5:48)	The quality of being without limits
Immense (Isaiah 66:1; 1 Kings 8:27)	The quality of being spatially limitless
Omnipresent (Psalm 139:7-10)	The quality of being present everywhere
Omniscient (Job 37:16; Proverbs 24:12)	The quality of knowing everything
Omnipotent (Genesis 17:1)	The quality of being all powerful
Sovereign (Deuteronomy 10:14; Isaiah 40:15-17)	The quality of being supreme

Take a moment to reflect on the above attributes. What did you learn about God?

Considering what you know about God, what do God's attributes reveal about you and your relationship with him?

REFLECT

The Bible reveals many more attributes about God. Read the verses below while taking note of the corresponding attribute. God is—

1. Full of wisdom (Ephesians 3:10)
2. Holy (Isaiah 6:1-4)
3. Righteous (Psalm 145:7, 17)
4. Just (Isaiah 45:21)
5. Good (Mark 10:18)
6. Loving (John 3:16; 1 John 3:16-18)
7. A God who hates (Psalm 5:5; Malachi 1:2-3)
8. A God who exercises grace (Ephesians 2:8; Hebrews 2:9)
9. Merciful (Deuteronomy 4:31; Romans 11:30-32)
10. Longsuffering (Psalm 86:14-17)

Now match the above attributes of God with their corresponding definitions below. (Write the attribute next to the definition.)

- Set apart: _____
- Exercising unmerited favor: _____
- Being and doing right: _____
- Being fair: _____
- Reacting against sin: _____
- Being and doing good: _____
- Being patient: _____
- Caring: _____
- Showing compassion: _____
- Know-how: _____

PRAY

Draw a picture that illustrates how you see God using his attributes around you each day. Try to include at least three of the attributes you've studied. After listing the attributes, take a moment to pray using very few words. Try to focus on the three attributes in your picture. For example, you might say, "God, thanks for being a righteous, loving, and merciful God!" Repeat

this prayer for five minutes, allowing your mind and heart to meditate on the greatness of God revealed in these attributes.

IMMERSE

As you move through your day, find a place where you can sit and view as much of the sky as possible. You won't be able to view the entire sky without moving your eyes, so each time your eyes move, repeat this simple phrase: "God, you are amazing! Nothing can contain you, for you are spatially limitless."

Interaction 3: What Makes God Unique?

CONSIDER

God is unlike any other god worshipped today or at any time in history. He's unique for two reasons—his unity and his tri-unity. God is a God of singularity, yet at the same time God is three Persons. God is one God because he's comprised of only one divine nature. Yet he's also three Persons because God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit share or possess in common this one divine nature. This singular, shared divine nature establishes the Three as one God.

Before you begin this interaction, take a brief moment to reflect on the above statement about God. Does it confuse you? Is it hard to grasp? You aren't alone. God is a mystery to us all. We know God consists of three Persons because the Bible teaches that truth. What we don't fully understand is how that can be. Our limited minds make it hard for us to truly comprehend our limitless God. Yet, that's also what makes God worthy of our worship.

Ecclesiastes 11:5 states, "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things." As people of God, we cannot let the unanswered questions and mysteries of God limit our faith. Instead, they should increase and build into our faith. After all, if you and I knew everything about God, how big of a God would he actually be?

DISCOVER

In his book *Practical Christian Theology: Examining the Great Doctrines of the Faith*, Floyd H. Barackman says that the biblical doctrine of God may be summarized as follows: (1) There is one

God, (2) The Godhead consists of three Persons, (3) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct, coexistent, eternal Persons, and (4) The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each God.

Let's take a look at each of these truths about the Trinity.

1. There Is One God

Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." This truth is repeated throughout the Bible. Take a look at the following verses:

- Isaiah 45:5
- 1 Corinthians 8:4
- Galatians 3:20
- 1 Timothy 2:5

2. The Godhead Consists of Three Persons

Matthew 28:19 says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Read these additional verses that show God as three in one.

- Genesis 1:26
- 2 Corinthians 13:14

3. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit Are Distinct, Coexistent, and Eternal Persons

In John 14:16-17 Jesus said to his disciples, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." Read the following verses that also speak of the members of the Godhead:

- Psalm 2:7
- Psalm 51:10-12

4. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit Are Each God

Evidence that all three Persons of the Trinity are God can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. Read the verses below.

Old Testament

The Father is God: Psalm 45:6-7; Psalm 110:1

The Son is God: Isaiah 7:14; 9:6

The Holy Spirit is God: Jeremiah 31:33-34

New Testament

The Father is God: John 6:27; Romans 1:7; 1 Peter 1:2

The Son is God: John 1:1; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8

The Holy Spirit is God: 1 Corinthians 3:16; Acts 5:3-4

REFLECT

Take a moment to draw a picture that illustrates the truths you've just learned about the Trinity. If you have access to colored pens or pencils, choose three different colors. Use one of the three colors to represent one of the members of the Trinity. After you draw the picture, spend some time meditating on it. Empty your mind of all distractions and fill it with *only* truths about the Trinity. Then write a paragraph (below your picture) that explains the truths. Write it as if you're in a conversation with one of your friends.