

SELECTIONS FROM THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

BELIEVE

LIVING THE STORY OF THE BIBLE
TO BECOME LIKE JESUS

GENERAL EDITOR
RANDY FRAZEE

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Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Drive SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49546

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THINK



CHAPTER

1

God

KEY QUESTION

Who is God?

KEY IDEA

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God—
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

KEY VERSE

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God, and the fellowship
of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14

Belief in God is the very foundation of the Christian faith. Christianity is the only spiritual belief system that emanates from a Creator-God who had no beginning, who interacts with his creation as a plural entity and who exhibits preeminence over all other gods and beings.

We will be reading Scripture passages in this chapter that describe how we know about God, all aspects of his essence and what they mean to us:

- *God Reveals Himself*
- *The One True God*
- *God in Three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit*
- *The Trinity in Our Lives*

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

Everything begins with God. The Bible never seeks to defend the existence of God. It is assumed. God has revealed himself so powerfully through his creation—both at the macro and micro level—that at the end of the day, no one will have an excuse for not putting their trust in him.

🔑 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

GENESIS 1:1 🔑

The heavens declare the glory of God;
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
 Day after day they pour forth speech;
 night after night they reveal knowledge.
 They have no speech, they use no words;
 no sound is heard from them.
 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
 their words to the ends of the world.
 In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.

PSALM 19:1–4

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

ROMANS 1:20

In what ways do you see the invisible qualities
of God revealed in nature?

THE ONE TRUE GOD

From beginning to end, the Bible reveals that there is only one true God. But who is he? The book of Deuteronomy looks back at how Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. During that time God, through the ten plagues, had revealed himself as the one true, all-powerful God over Pharaoh. Now a new generation had grown up in the wilderness and was poised to inherit the land God had promised Abraham. Moses offered the second generation a series of farewell speeches to remind them to choose, worship and follow the one true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If they did, all would go well for them.

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. DEUTERONOMY 6:1–9

What are some of the main points
of God's requirements for his people? Why do you
think he emphasized these things?

After Moses died, Joshua became the next great leader of the Israelites. He was charged with leading the people into the promised land. God was with them and fought for them as they began conquering the land. Under Joshua's leadership the Israelites remained steady in their devotion to God. Before Joshua died, he gathered the people together and issued them a stiff challenge to choose to serve the Lord, the one true God.

Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the Euphrates and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his family went down to Egypt.

"Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. When I brought your people out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the wilderness for a long time.

"I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.

"Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove

them out before you — also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’

“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

“Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws. And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD.

“See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.”

Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to their own inheritance.

After these things, Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Serah in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel.

JOSHUA 24:1–31

Unfortunately the Israelites failed to keep their promise to follow only God. Through the people's repeated disobedience, God weakened Israel's influence—445 years after Joshua died—by dividing them into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel did not have one good king during its more than 200 years of existence. King Ahab was particularly wicked, as he introduced the worship of the pagan god Baal to Israel. But God demonstrated through the prophet Elijah that he, the Lord, not Baal or any other “god,” is the one true God.

Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

“I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. **Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”**

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD’s

prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire — he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

"Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it

be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD — he is God! The LORD — he is God!”

Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

1 KINGS 18:16–40

Why did God have to prove over and over that he is the one true God?

GOD IN THREE PERSONS: FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

*Throughout the Old Testament, people were invited to worship the one true God, but what do we know about this God of miracles and creative wonder? Christians believe God is actually three persons, a “Trinity.” Though the word “Trinity” isn’t found in the Bible, in the very beginning of God’s story, the creation story, we see hints that God is plural. Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let **us** make mankind in **our** image, in **our** likeness.’” God is himself a mini-community.*

The creation story tells us we were created in God’s image. When he made the first human (Adam), God wanted him to experience the community and relationship that has eternally existed within the Trinity. That’s why he made Eve. Notice that Adam and Eve were not two separate beings. Eve came out of Adam, and they became two distinct persons who shared one being, like God. God is three distinct persons who share a single being.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. **Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.**

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. GENESIS 2:4–9

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. **Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.**

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Recalling Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness,’” God as a plural being is clearly evident from the very beginning of the Bible. But what are the identities of the individual persons of God, and how are they just one being? How do they interact? The opening words of John’s Gospel makes the answer more clear.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

JOHN 1:1–5

The “Word” here refers to Jesus. John refers to him as “God,” as divine. John also says Jesus was there in the beginning. Jesus, the divine Word, partnered with God to create all that we see and all that we have yet to see.

So who were the other members of the Trinity? The second sentence of the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit was also present at creation: “The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Jesus and the Spirit were at the creation of the world; these two persons are God. Is that it? Who else makes up the person of God? Fast-forward to the baptism of Jesus at the age of 30 to discover the answer. As you read this account, look for the appearance of all three persons of the Trinity.

🔑 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene — during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,

make straight paths for him.
 Every valley shall be filled in,
 every mountain and hill made low.
 The crooked roads shall become straight,
 the rough ways smooth.
 And all people will see God's salvation.”


LUKE 3:1-6

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

LUKE 3:15-18

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph.

LUKE 3:21-23 

Three distinct persons are fully revealed in Scripture to make up the identity of the one true God: the Father, the Son Jesus and the Spirit. And all three were involved at the baptism of Jesus—the Father spoke, the Son was baptized and the Holy Spirit descended on the Son. Throughout the centuries, followers of Jesus have come to call the one true God the Trinity, three persons who share one being. As difficult as this concept is to understand, it is important to our lives.

In what ways have you experienced God as Father?
 As Jesus the Son? As the Holy Spirit?

THE TRINITY IN OUR LIVES

In the spirit of Joshua of the Old Testament, in the early church Paul called people to declare the identity of the one true God. During his travels Paul went to the great Areopagus in Athens, Greece. The intellectual people who lived there created an altar to many gods. Notice how they even created an altar dedicated “to an unknown God” in case they missed one and therefore offended them. Paul declares the identity of this God as the one who created everything in the beginning (see Genesis 1–2) and is now revealed in the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. His words to the people of Athens are applicable to all those who believe—God is everywhere and there is nothing in this world that his hand has not touched. The Trinity is woven into every aspect of our lives.

While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “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.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by

human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” At that, Paul left the Council. Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

ACTS 17:16–34

What is meant by the phrase Paul quoted: “For in him we live and move and have our being?” Why do you think this needed to be said to this group of Athenians?

The power and identity of the one true God is highlighted throughout Paul’s writing, including the last words of 2 Corinthians, which he penned with the benediction below.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:14

Notice how all three members of the Trinity are involved in our lives. God, the Father, loves us and sought a way for us to come

back into a relationship with him. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, provided the way back to God by offering himself as a sacrifice in our place. Now that we believe, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, fellowships with us as we journey through life, guiding and comforting us every step of the way.

WHAT WE BELIEVE

The Bible never tries to prove the existence of God—his existence is simply an assumed fact. God has clearly revealed himself through creation, in events such as Jesus' baptism and in our own consciences, leaving everyone without excuse in the end. The key question we asked at the beginning of this chapter comes down to the declaration of who the one true God is. The God who protected Israel and demonstrated power over false gods declares, "I AM!"

The journey of faith begins with our belief in God. Like the Israelites of the Old Testament and the early Christians of the New Testament, we too are called to make a personal declaration. Do we believe in the one true God? Do we accept the Bible's revelation that God exists in three persons?