

**TARA-LEIGH COBBLE**

**THE JOY OF  
THE  
TRINITY**

**ONE GOD,  
THREE PERSONS**

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# Introduction

If you had to describe God's personality, what would you say? Not what He *does* but His demeanor. Not what He's capable of but what He's *like*.

Here's how King David described God: "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). He also said God's presence brings gladness and joy (Ps. 21:6)!

Does it surprise you to know that God is *happy*? He is infinitely joyful! And because He's so delighted, He can be delightful to us—by sharing who He is with us. If joy is your goal, knowing the triune God will be supremely useful to you. In fact, this is the only path to true joy.

But that doesn't mean it will be an easy path. Everything beautiful in life has some level of unavoidable difficulty attached to it, including our best and strongest relationships. In every relationship, you have to go through the process of getting to know that person. Along the way you face

misunderstandings and miscommunications; maybe you also encounter unmet expectations—all as a part of building the relationship. People are wonderfully complex, aren't we?

Our relationship with God has a lot of those same complexities because He's a Person too. *Three* Persons, actually—Father, Son, and Spirit. You're likely here because you already agree with the idea of the trinitarian God of the Bible, but you may not know what that means. So, to a certain degree, I'll assume we're on the same page and that I don't need to spend paragraphs or pages convincing you God exists or the Bible is true. However, even those of us who consent to belief in the Trinity have a hard time grasping exactly what (or *Who?*) it is (*They are?*). See how complex it already feels?

J. I. Packer says the doctrine of the Trinity “confronts us with perhaps the most difficult thought that the human mind has ever been asked to handle. It is not easy; but it is true.”<sup>1</sup> Someone once said, “If you don't believe in the Trinity, you will lose your soul. But if you try to understand it, you will lose your mind.”<sup>2</sup> It's true that some things are beyond our *complete* knowledge, but they aren't beyond our *partial* knowledge. So in this book, we'll make it our aim to know the highest percentage of what our minds can possibly grasp. After all, knowing Him is the path to joy, and I want *as much joy as possible*.

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I was born with several birth defects, mostly related to my heart. I remember having surgeries as a kid, and the doctors would say, “You’re going to take a little nap, and when you wake up, we’ll give you ice cream!” Seriously? Deal! Naps and ice cream are my love languages! But now I know it was *more* than just a nap. Back then, I experienced the blessings of anesthesia without knowing its name or being able to explain it. But even after I learned the word “anesthesia,” I still didn’t understand it.

In 2016, I had two open-heart surgeries to fix those birth defects. During that process, I became friends with one of my ICU nurses who eventually quit that job and began working to become a nurse anesthetist. According to her, no one fully understands what anesthesia is or how it works. But she’s still paying lots of money to study it so she can work in that field someday.

Anesthesiologists know more than she’ll know when she becomes a nurse anesthetist. And she knows more than I know. And I know more now than I did as a kid, even being a kid who had experienced the blessing of it personally and whose life had been saved by it. Spending time to better understand the Trinity is similar: it is a mystery to even the most studied professionals, and everyone knows it can’t be *fully* understood. But it can be *more* understood by those willing to study it. So while we will never fully understand the Trinity—at least not in this life—we can understand more than we currently do.

And if it leads to fullness of joy (a lot more joy than ice cream, mind you!), why wouldn't we?

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**If we know we *can* learn more about the Trinity, and we know that joy is promised on the other side of our learning, then why do people tend to brush over it instead of dig in? What makes this doctrine so challenging?**

I believe there are a few things that contribute to our collective confusion and difficulty with the Trinity.

### **1. Simplified Explanations**

If you've ever been part of a Bible study or a Sunday School class that talked about the Trinity, you've likely heard analogies of shamrocks and eggs and H<sub>2</sub>O. Maybe someone has drawn a picture of a triangle or a shield. Every analogy of the Trinity breaks down at some level simply because there's nothing else in existence quite like God. Everything else has a point of origin and relies on the things around it for its definition, but God is uncreated and has always been who He is.

Some analogies are better than others, but even those require caveats. Other analogies are downright heretical—which is to say, they tell more of a lie about God than a truth, and they're more harmful than helpful in giving us a right view of God. (See a list of heresies on page 193.) He isn't dependent on anything else to be who He is, so when we

compare Him to something that inherently is dependent on something else, it will always lead us down the wrong path. We crave analogies because they seem to help simplify God, and we prefer to simplify Him because it's easier than studying His complexity. But is that how you want to be known? Is that how you aim to build a relationship with anyone you love? Simplified explanations fall short of being enlightening or fulfilling in our relationship with God.

## **2. Selfishness**

This answer may not apply to you, but it certainly does to me. My selfishness was one of the biggest hurdles that kept me from digging into the Trinity. I preferred to focus on God's promises to me and all the things He could do to benefit me, so I was content to stop short of looking for *who He is*. I tuned out when someone mentioned the Trinity—not because I already knew all the details but because I didn't yet know enough. I was in for a real surprise when I did begin to study the Trinity. It isn't just a theological concept; fundamentally, it's a *relationship*. To have a healthy, functioning relationship, you have to look beyond yourself and get to know the other person involved.

## **3. The Bible Never Uses the Word *Trinity***

However, that doesn't mean the triune God is not addressed in Scripture. In fact, we'll read more Trinity-related passages than you can imagine! The idea of the Trinity is

found throughout the Bible, starting in Genesis 1:1. Jesus talked about it in the Gospels, and the apostles affirmed it throughout their New Testament letters. Still, the early church struggled to summarize it until a theologian named Tertullian, who lived about a century after Jesus's resurrection, created the word *Trinity* to succinctly reference Scripture's teaching about God.<sup>3</sup>

(By the way, many books cover how and why and when the early church named and articulated the doctrine of the Trinity as it appears in Scripture. Other books investigate the original words and languages used in Scripture to explain the Trinity. And there are still others that show how the Trinity is unique to Christianity and how our triune God stands in stark contrast to the gods of other religions. We won't cover those topics in-depth, but in case you're interested in learning more about any of them, I've built out a list of suggestions on page 202.)

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This doctrine is absolutely necessary to the Christian faith. Its importance can't be overemphasized. Theologian Ligon Duncan said that asking, *Is the identity of the Trinity important to the gospel?* is similar to asking, "Is who your wife is central to your marriage?"<sup>4</sup> Without the Trinity as the core of our beliefs, every other doctrine of our faith starts to come unglued and unhinged. You cannot have the Christian

faith without a triune God. This is a bold statement, but the creeds support it. (See pages 195–199 to read the Athanasian Creed.) Every other Christian belief is built on this foundation. Without it, we slide into the cultic beliefs of Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or Muslims.

It’s tempting to diminish the importance of the Trinity and to seek a false peace by simply “focusing on the Word of God.” But that’s shallow at best and foolish at least. In fact, God’s Word is precisely where we learn about His Persons; He’s given it to us so we can know Him in greater depth. How heartless and arrogant to want to know less of Him than He has made possible. People who truly know God have always wanted to know God more—both for their own sakes and for the sake of being able to talk more clearly about Him and His love with others. So I’m glad you’re here, trying—digging in. And I know God smiles at it too. He loves to be known and understood and loved, just like you love to be known and understood and loved.

By the end of this book, you’ll be shocked at the dimension, texture, and beauty you’ve started to see in the triune God. It has been there all along—in the Bible we read and the songs we sing—but perhaps we’re too familiar with it to notice it. Chances are you’re already immersed in some level of knowledge or assumption about the Trinity, so you’ll find that instead of *starting over* with your beliefs about the Father, Son, and Spirit, you’ll likely just *develop* them as we move through this book together. Those beliefs will grow muscles! It will be

challenging, but by God's power at work within you, I believe you will know and love Him more than you ever thought possible!

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There are three additional things I want to point out before we begin:

1. I've written a Bible study on the same topic—it's called *He's Where the Joy Is: Getting to Know the Captivating God of the Trinity*. Why a book *and* a Bible study? Because the Trinity is so important. It's a classic Christian topic that should be explored not just in one way, but a variety of ways. Each format offers its own approach, depending on the medium you prefer. In my mind, I'd want you to explore both formats (or even give one as a gift to a theologically curious friend), because you really can't get enough of the Trinity!

2. Since we may be covering some terms you aren't familiar with yet, I've included a glossary in the back of the book. Words that appear in the glossary are in bold font, underlined (e.g., **theophany**).

3. You'll also find some additional helps in the back of the book: the Athanasian Creed, a list of heresies, and suggestions for further study on this topic.

# 1

## Unity and Diversity

*“The divine nature is really and entirely identical with each of the three persons, all of whom can therefore be called one.”*—Thomas Aquinas<sup>1</sup>

*“While the three members of the Trinity are distinct, this does not mean that any is inferior to the other. Instead, they are all identical in attributes. They are equal in power, love, mercy, justice, holiness, knowledge, and all other qualities. Each Person is fully God.”*—Matt Perman<sup>2</sup>

As we approach such a complex topic, I want you to know that *you can do this*. You can grow in your understanding of the Trinity in a way that amplifies your love for God and

transforms your life. We're going to take it slowly, and I'm going to explain things in common laymen's terms because that's what I am: a layman. I may occasionally use a bigger theological term, but I've aimed to define those in the glossary in the back. (Note: those words will be bolded and underlined.) If you come across a confusing word that is not in the glossary (bolded/underlined), do a web search for the definition.

There are lots of ways we could approach studying the Trinity. This is how I've done it: first, we'll start in this chapter by looking at what God says about Himself—Father, Son, and Spirit. We'll see how they're unified, *and* how they're distinct. In the three chapters that follow, we'll take a look at each Person individually. Then we'll wrap up with two chapters about how this information impacts us—how God's identity informs our relationship with Him and subsequently with the world around us. Everything He is changes everything we are, and it is the most joy-inducing thing I can imagine! I'm excited for us to learn about Him and to watch His beauty unfold all around us.

## **God's Revealing**

Have you ever fumbled through your house in a power outage, bumping into walls and bruising your shins on the coffee table? You easily navigate your way around that furniture on a daily basis, but with the lights off, it can be more of a challenge. Many of us who have spent time in church

or in Scripture keep bumping into the Trinity but aren't able to identify or describe it clearly. There's a good reason for that. Through most of the Bible, it may seem as though God doesn't say a lot about the Trinity—at least not directly.

I borrowed the darkened house illustration from B. B. Warfield, who said the Old Testament is like a furnished room that is dimly lit, and the New Testament is where God flips on the light switch.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true where the Trinity is concerned. The Trinity “furniture” has been there all along, sitting in the same spots, and the New Testament light just reveals where the furniture has always been.

It's not as though God was being cruel in the Old Testament. He wasn't trying to bruise any shins. He knows relationships work best through **progressive revelation**, a gradual revealing of more and more information over time. In healthy relationships, we don't expect to share or learn everything the first time we meet someone. This is how Scripture describes God's relationship with humanity. He didn't reveal His whole plan for His people at one time. Instead, He used different means at different times, patiently giving us more information piece by piece as He moved through the process.

Despite God's progressive revelation, you and I have most likely suffered from another problem: we've been living in this furnished, lit house while wearing blindfolds. We've bumped into some things here and there; we've sat on them and trusted their ability to hold us up. Perhaps we've even occasionally gotten a glimpse of the room layout when we tilt our heads

at just the right angle. But we haven't actively explored what He progressively revealed. Now is the time for us to take our blindfolds off and let the light of Scripture show us the beauty and design of this house we've been living in.

(Another problem we've suffered is running into false ideas about God's trinitarian nature that were never true of Him to begin with! If you're interested in those, look through the list of heresies on pages 193–194. Make note if you've encountered any of them, or if you've unknowingly and accidentally believed one of them. This list will give you a helpful place to return and review in case you hear something about God that strikes you as odd, wrong, or confusing.)

Much of what we know about the Trinity wasn't revealed until the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God's first priority was explaining to His people that He is ONE God—the one true God. **Polytheism** was rampant among all the other nations, and God wanted to redirect the hearts of His people to the truth, so He repeated this theme throughout the Old Testament. In fact, to both ancient and modern Jews who rely on the Old Testament, the most important Scripture is generally regarded to be Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." God is one. This **doctrine** stands out as the most important doctrine of the Old Testament, the heart of **monotheism** (the belief in one true God—as opposed to polytheism, the belief in many gods). But this verse points to far more than just the fact that there is

one true God; it points to His preeminence. He is singular in His essence and superior in His being.

Since the ancient Jews were surrounded by polytheistic nations, the Old Testament writers spent a lot of effort establishing there is one true God. Only then could God begin to introduce more complexity about Himself: He is one God who consists of three Persons. In the next steps of His progressive revelation, God sent His Son to earth to dwell among the people and then sent His Spirit to dwell within His people. Here's how Hebrews 1:1–3 (CSB) puts it:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

God's process remains obscured to someone who only reads the Old Testament. To see the Trinity in the Old Testament, you have to read it through the New Testament lens. But make no mistake: God had been dropping hints about the Trinity since Genesis 1. We'll see some of them in this book.

There's one important thing we must note when it comes to Scripture's progressive revelation: it is not corrective revelation. When God reveals something new, He doesn't negate something He previously revealed. He builds on and expands what He has already revealed. For instance, read Genesis 1:1–2 and John 1:1–3:

In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the **Spirit of God** was hovering over the surface of the waters. (Gen. 1:1–2 CSB, emphasis added)

In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word was with God**, and the **Word was God**. He was with God in the beginning. **All things were created through him**, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. (John 1:1–3 CSB, emphasis added)

Do you see it? At the start of the world's story, we see hints of the Trinity—God's Spirit and God's Word (whom other Scripture passages identify as God's Son) were the means God used to do His work of creation. God was doing one work—creating the universe—through what we only later come to understand as His three Persons.

And don't forget that mankind is part of the universe that our triune God created. Evidence of the Trinity's presence is as clear in the creation of humans as it is in the creation of the sun, moon, and stars. Just read Genesis 1:26 and notice the "our" language. If you've ever wondered who "our" is in this passage, it's the Trinity!

Then God said, "Let us make man in **our** image, according to **our** likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth." (CSB, emphasis added)

Look back at the John 1 passage above. Remember that the Bible presents Jesus Christ as the Word of God (John 1:14; Rev. 19:13–16). So when we put the pieces together, we can see that the preincarnate Christ was present in creation, as described in Genesis 1, as was God's Spirit, who "was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). When the New Testament points to the Spirit, His actions are described with similar fluttering, wind-related words, helping us see He is the same Person who was present and active at creation. The Old and New Testaments work together to help us better understand what God has been saying all along about His presence and activity in our world.

In our journey to know God better, we've now covered the fact that God is a *revealer*. He reveals His nature, a nature

that is triune. The next thing we can learn about God to know Him better is to spend some time looking at God's *unity* (as it applies to His oneness) and His *diversity* (as it applies to the three Persons of the Trinity).

## **God's Unity**

As we move through this book, we'll cover the three foundations of the Trinity multiple times so you'll know them by heart when we finish.

### ***The First Foundation of the Trinity Is: There Is Only One True God.***

The Bible's descriptions of *Elohim* (the name God gives Himself in Gen. 1:1) and His actions set Him apart from all other gods of all other religions.<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament authors repeatedly emphasized the theme of God's superiority and His oneness. These two themes are tied together: not only is our God the one true God who is set apart in power and eternity, but He is ONE God. If there were any other gods on His level, they would have to be eternal like Him and all-powerful like Him, which is functionally impossible—not only because one of them would've had to create the other but because that would also require one to predate the other.

Consider the passages below. Do you see any words that point to God's oneness and unity? Make note of them as you read.

“Do not have other gods besides me.”

(Exod. 20:3 CSB)

“Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

(Deut. 6:4–5 CSB)

“You are my witnesses” . . . and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. No god was formed before me, and there will be none after me.”

(Isa. 43:10 CSB)

This is what the LORD, your Redeemer who formed you from the womb, says: I am the LORD, who made everything; who stretched out the heavens by myself; who alone spread out the earth.

(Isa. 44:24 CSB)

“Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth.

For I am God,  
and there is no other.”

(Isa. 45:22 CSB)

Since progressive revelation isn't corrective, the New Testament reiterates the theme of "oneness" from the Old Testament, even as it helps us understand the three Persons of God.

For more clarity from the Scriptures, read the following verses slowly and carefully. Can you see the aspects within these passages that point to God's *unity and oneness*? On the other hand, can you see which aspects point to His *diversity* of Persons?

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

So God created man  
in his own image;  
he created him in the image of God;  
he created them male and female.  
(Gen. 1:26–27 CSB)

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."  
(Matt. 28:19 CSB)

Yet for us there is one God, the Father. All things are from him, and we exist for him.

And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. All things are through him, and we exist through him.  
(1 Cor. 8:6 CSB)

It's an interesting exercise to see both God's oneness and His diversity on display in the Bible, isn't it? Here's something I caught when looking at Matthew 28:19: we are baptized into only one name (singular), not names (plural)! This is significant, especially as it refers collectively to the three Persons of God. In Scripture, a name represents the will, character, and essence of a person. The Trinity has one will, character, and essence across all three divine Persons, even in the Old Testament where the Trinity is less evident.

### **Consistency**

If you've ever studied the Old Testament, you may have come away thinking something along these lines: *Why is God so angry in the Old Testament? I like the New Testament better. God is so much nicer after Jesus shows up on the scene.*

I've had those thoughts too. But when we pull God and His actions out of context, as we're often prone to do, it's easy to misunderstand His character. If we divide Him into three Persons without remembering He is ONE, we may begin to assign certain temperaments to the Persons of the Trinity (i.e., the Father is the angry one; Jesus is the nice one, and the Spirit is the weird and/or mysterious one). The good news for us (as we will come to see in the pages ahead) is that this is

theologically impossible. Much to our relief, “Old Testament God” isn’t unlikable as we may have believed Him to be. For all of us who have ever felt that way, Scripture is here to set us straight and invite us into something much more beautiful and winsome. Whew!

Contrary to popular thought, God doesn’t undergo a personality transplant at the end of the Old Testament. When we follow the story line of Scripture, we see a God who created mankind out of an overflow of love, who clothed Adam and Eve before they even repented, who rescued the Israelites out of slavery and then led them as they established a functioning society, joyfully choosing to set up camp in their midst and repeatedly forgiving them, blessing them, and reminding them He was sending a Messiah to rescue them. This is the heart of God evident in the scope of the Old Testament’s metanarrative. All along He dropped hints of what was coming, and then He delivered on His promise!

Of course, if we drop down in the middle of the Old Testament in a time when He’s punishing the Israelites, He seems harsh. We won’t understand why His laws were helpful and necessary. We’ll fail to notice He’s already told them repeatedly not to do that specific sinful thing, told them what type of punishment to expect if/when they do it, and then continued to provide for them and protect them despite their rebellion. With our limited information, we’ll view Him as strict or angry, and we won’t draw near to Him. We’ll prefer to stay in the New Testament where we can read about Jesus,

who paid for all the sins we know we've committed. This is a common problem we encounter when we don't read the story of Scripture chronologically (in the order it happened, not the order it is laid out). Reading the Bible at all is an important endeavor, but reading chronologically can help us get to know God in the order He chose to reveal Himself through progressive revelation.

There is a necessary process of the gospel: we must be confronted with God's laws and requirements, see that we fall short and can't obey His laws, and realize our need for rescue. Jesus came to be that Rescuer. He not only paid our sin debt, but He also granted us His righteousness! This is how progressive revelation works in our relationship with God, and it's the reason we still desperately need the truths of the Old Testament in order to see Him rightly!

The same is true of our understanding of the Trinity. Without the Old Testament, it might be easy to divide God into three separate Gods, or even to think God shape-shifts from one "form" into the other. (See *Tritheism and Modalism* in the list of heresies on pages 193–194.) But when we read Scripture as a whole, we see His oneness throughout, which helps us maintain this doctrinal balance: *Each Person of the Trinity indwells the other two*. We can't emphasize one Person of God over the others. It's vital to view them holistically, or we'll be led into heresy. But the Trinity doesn't mean God is divided into three parts like pieces of a pie. *Each Person of the Trinity fully possesses/is the complete divine essence*. The word we

use to describe this is **consubstantial**—regarded as the same in substance or essence.

Since they are all equally and fully divine within the Trinity unto themselves, no one Person plays an eternally dominant role. They each point to the others. The Father glorifies and points to the Son. The Son glorifies and points to the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit glorifies and points to the Son and the Father. Understanding this truth is VITAL. It shows us so much about God's character. He is always pointing externally—even with Himself. This shows us the heart of God is focused on outgoing love.

The Persons of God aren't only united in their essence, but they're united in their purpose as well. And this divine, eternal unity is inseparable. God has always been One, and He has always been Three. He didn't become this way to serve some kind of purpose or function; it is who He is and how He is.

As we wrap up this section on God's unity and move on to God's diversity, take a moment to pause and etch the first foundation of the Trinity in your mind right now: **THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUE GOD.**

## **God's Diversity**

***The Second Foundation of the Trinity Is: There Are Three Divine Persons of the One True God.***

Consider Genesis 1:1: