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CHAPTER 1

GOD'S LOVE

The Fountain of All Goodness

Scripture repeatedly proclaims that God is love. Our hearts long for His love to be boldly reflected in our lives. A love that is true, good, faithful, joyful, unsullied, unchanging, and unceasing. This love is evidenced solely in and through God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

KATHERINE ELIZABETH CLARK

This is a book about the Holy Trinity and Christian missions. Now, when you read those words on the page, or when you first saw them on the cover, it might have prompted the question “What kind of crazy man writes a book about that? The Trinity and missions? What do they have to do with each other?” It’s a bit like writing a book about sushi and spaceships, or rugby and rattlesnakes, or crocheting and chaos theory. Those things just don’t go together, no matter how hard you try to pair them. Or so you might think.

But then perhaps you are reminded that the Trinity and missions aren't totally unrelated. A key Christian doctrine like the Trinity and an obvious Christian obligation like evangelism—they're in the same ballpark, right? They both come under the same "big tent" at the religious circus. Somehow they are related. But how?

Perhaps the Trinity is for one kind of Christian, while missions is for another. Those tweed-jacketed fellows called "theologians" must think long and hard about the Trinity while stroking their beards as they sit beside the fireplace. Meanwhile, the hard-charging, pith-helmeted missionaries with machetes in one hand and a Bible in the other are clearing the jungle and making a way for the gospel. Both tasks are God things, in their own way. They're *sort of* related to each other, right? Yes, perhaps they are—though not by much, we suspect.

This sort of thinking comes because we don't view the Trinity as practical, or at least not as practical as good old-fashioned soul-saving on the front lines. I think most Christians feel that there is the God whom we know and love and sort of understand—and then there is the Trinity. And the Trinity is, well, it only matters somewhere over there in the ivy-covered seminaries. It's really just for those pasty-faced, socially disastrous theologians. They're the ones who like to talk about Trinity. And when that has befuddled them enough, they switch to talking about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. (That's a real thing, actually. Medieval theologians debated the issue. Maybe some theologians still do.) So that's how the Trinity must be as well. Fusty graybeards debating how $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$,

and all that. *But come on, that's just not relevant to anyone now, we think.*

Deep in the Christian psyche today is this idea—a dangerous and mistaken idea—that the Trinity is a wart on our knowledge of God. It's an irrelevance. And you can see it when you see Christians actually sharing their faith. Just think about a Christian sharing the gospel for the first time. What is it you expect to hear? You expect to hear about the cross, about God's grace, about forgiveness. It's all about Jesus, because who doesn't like Jesus, right? I mean, He would pet soft lambs, and He looked so cute lying in that manger. And He came to give you God's gift of salvation so you can go to heaven. Those are the sort of things you expect to hear from first-time witnesses. But I don't expect them to be clear about *which* God they are talking about to the unbeliever. And I certainly don't expect them to be clear on the Trinity—or even to bring up the concept. Why would you confuse the simple gospel message with a bunch of extraneous metaphysics?

And so, across the West today, we rhapsodize over the beauty of the gospel but perhaps neglect the beauty of the God whose gospel it is. So what we are going to contemplate now, as the first order of business, is that God is lovely precisely because God is triune.

THE GOD WHO IS MISSION

My goal in this book is for the Christian to enjoy the extraordinary and beautiful truth that mission—which is about going *out*, whether nearby or to a foreign land—is not something alien

to who God is. It is not that mission is, “Well, unfortunately, we have to go out and do all the hard work of evangelizing while God enjoys Himself up there in heaven, leaning back on His throne listening to angel songs.” That ain’t it. No. Never was, and never will be.

Mission is rooted in the Trinity, in the very being and nature and heart of God. And this is something deeply heart-winning and attractive in Him. If there is one thing I really want, above all, to communicate in this book, it is the great truth that God is mission. Wherever you’re at with God, particularly if you aren’t too thrilled with Him at the moment, I’d love for your

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eyes to be opened so you see just how stunningly beautiful and satisfying He is. I pray that your heart begins—maybe for the first time in a long time, maybe for the first time ever—to burn with a love for Him. Not just a duty that compels you and tells you what you ought to do, but rather, that you truly *love* Him! And then, out of this deep love, you will want to see the whole world come to

know about Him too.

Some of you reading this have gone away from your home and the familiar for the purpose of missions—reaching people in another culture or another land with the Christian faith. Or perhaps you are training for a cross-cultural mission. Others of you are living missionally where you are. Your purpose is to be

intentional in reaching your neighborhood, family, workplace with whatever evangelistic opportunities open themselves to you. But either way, I do not want you, dear friend, to just go out on mission. That gets talked about a lot today. It's a way of making Christianity seem exciting, like an adventure that you undertake with faithful comrades. It's like heading out to the mountains with a backpack of provisions and Aragorn at your side. You're joining some friends to go save the world. Who wouldn't want to be part of a mission like that?

But going out on mission is not the primary thing; it is a secondary thing. I want first and foremost for you to love God so that your mission is nothing other than speaking to the world about who you love. To go on God's mission is to speak of Him out of a heart that is captivated by His beauty. And to do this, we must know who He is. So I want to start by thinking simply, by asking, "Who exactly is this God who shapes mission?" And our answer is that He is the triune God, for only a triune God can be truly missional—not just as a mission sender, but missional in His own being.

GETTING TO KNOW THE TRINITY

Where do we start when we want to think about the Trinity? Typically, since this doctrine is not well understood by us, and because it describes the infinite God, we immediately try to illustrate it with things from our world. We try to explain the supernatural by reference to the natural. Unfortunately, this is where so many go wrong. Because as soon as people hear the

word “Trinity,” all these weird illustrations immediately spring to mind.

You know how it is. In a Bible study group in your church, an unsuspecting new Christian says, “Please, can somebody explain the Trinity to me?”

And then someone goes, “Ah, yes. Well, you see, the infinite God is like a three-leaf clover. There is one leaf, yet three leaflets make it up. Three making one. I find this example so helpful.”

And someone else says, “No, no, no. God is like H₂O. There is ice, but then you warm up the Father and He gets a bit more liquid—a different state of matter, a different mode of being—and you warm Him up a bit more, and He is spiritual, you know.”

Or my favorite: “God is like an egg. There is the yolk. There is the white. And the shell. Three parts. Yet at the same time . . . wait for it . . . it’s just one egg.” Ta-da!

Is *anyone* going to bow down on their faces because of the “eggishness” of God?

And that’s why you think, “Of course not. That’s why I want to leave all the weirdness to the theologians.”

Friend, we Christians believe in the Trinity not because we sense God’s similarity with things from our backyard, or our stove top, or our breakfast table, but because of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Know Jesus, Know the Trinity

John 20:31 is John’s mission statement, the purpose of writing his gospel. He is telling us why he has written what he

has. That verse says, “these [words] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John asks you to put your faith in Jesus. It’s just a simple call to faith. But do you see what he has done? A simple call to faith in Jesus is a call to faith in a triune God. How so? Because Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. What does that word mean? The Anointed One, that is, He who is anointed with the Spirit. Acts 10:38 says, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.” The reality of the Holy Spirit is implicit in John’s term, “the Christ.” Then look what else John says: Jesus is the “Son of God.” In other words, God is His Father. All three persons of the Trinity are here! This sort of thing is everywhere in the Bible, once you have the eyes to see it.

The fact is, looking at the Trinity is simply pressing in to know who Jesus is.

God the Loving Father

A good way to begin to understand the triune God is to ponder these statements: Before God created the world, was He idle? Was He active? If He wasn’t idle, just what was He doing? Have you ever asked these sorts of questions? You know there’s got to be a pompous theological answer, right? So what *was* God doing before He created the world? If anyone ever asks, here’s a possible response: “You know, actually, John 17:24 tells us what God was doing back then. Jesus says, ‘Father . . . you loved me before the foundation of the world.’” That is the God

we are talking about. A God who is a Father, who has been eternally loving His Son.

Now, what does it mean that God is a Father? In Scripture, names are always meaningful. My name is Mike. But it could be Billy. It really doesn't matter. It doesn't tell you anything about me. Put any name on the cover of this book and it wouldn't make any difference. But when God is called Father, it is important because He *actually is* a Father. It's not just a convention by which we designate Him. It's a descriptor of His being. He is God the Father. And a father is someone who, giving life, lavishes love on his children. And if before all things God was eternally a Father, well, then, quite inevitably: God is eternally a life-giving, loving God.

May I pause here for a moment? You might be someone whose earthly father was cold or distant or aloof. Perhaps your father hurt you or caused you great pain. And so every time I write that word and you see it on the page, it makes you shrink into a shell because of what you have experienced. The word *father* is not good news to you. Dear friend, if that is you, God the Father is not called Father because He is like your dad. Earthly fathers are meant to be like this Father, but we all fail. Some catastrophically. So don't describe God the Father from what your dad was like and how he failed. Friend, the reason it hurts so much for you is because *father* should be such a sweet word for you, and you have been hurt, and that grieves me. And I grieve especially for you, right now, as you are being asked to look at the fatherhood of God. I want this book to be a balm for you. I want its message to help you. So try to look at the

term afresh and find its meaning reconstructed for you. Find the loveliness in the heavenly Father that perhaps you never enjoyed in your earthly father.

Let us consider some well-known words about the Father in 1 John 4. We will focus attention on verses 7–8: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” Notice what this passage says: Whoever loves knows God, because God is love.

Have you ever known a dear saint who has been walking with the Lord for years, who just seems to ooze joyfulness and love and generosity and compassion and kindness? And you think, *I want to be like that when I am seventy*. Someone whose very presence is gold. You go out for Sunday lunch with them after church or are invited to lunch at their place, and when you are with them, you start finding that you’re really nice around them. Right? Because they are never mean about people behind their backs. And just while you’re with them, you start actually being nicer. (You revert later, of course!) But while you’re with them, they change you.

This is a simple picture of how God is, according to John. God is love, and He is love in such a deep and powerful way that when you know Him you also will become loving. You couldn’t not be loving. You become what He is. This is what it means

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that God is Father. John's words in verse 8, "God is love," refer to God the Father. Do you see the next words? Verse 9: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." So the God who is love is the Father who sends His Son. *To be Father means to love.* To give out life, to beget the Son. Without love, He would not be who He is. He would not be Father. He would not have a Son to rain a cascade of love over. Simply put, this God is love. To be Father means to have a Son and to love Him eternally.

Images of God's Bountiful Love

As you might know, there are a couple of images that theologians like to use for describing the bounty of God's love. One is a scriptural image of the Lord as a fountain of life. And as theologians enjoy pointing out, for God to be a fountain, His living water must bubble over. That's what fountains do. They don't merely trickle parsimoniously. They generously shoot out their contents! So for the Father to be who He is, He must pour out life and love.

Another image is the shining sun. By nature of being the sun, it must give out life. Its very rays are life-giving. If you were to put down a tarp in your yard, the grass under it would wither and die. Grass can't grow in the dark. But if you shine light on grass, it grows. Just so with this God of ours, He must ever blaze out with love. And as with grass, water is needed too. Both of these things pour out health and life for living things. That is

our God! So now, my friend, you begin to see why the Trinity is such good news.

And why is God love? He is love because He is Trinity. And you get an image of this in the baptism of Jesus. If you want an illustration of the Trinity to share, use this one rather than the one about eggs.

Perhaps you remember this story in Luke 3, the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is there in the waters of the Jordan River, and He hears those words: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." And what have I left out? Is there only a heavenly voice? Is the scene otherwise empty? No, the Holy Spirit is also there, resting on Jesus in bodily form like a dove. That's the God we are talking about. The Father who pours out the Spirit of His love, making His love known to the Son. And the Son, how does He feel about it? There is this lovely moment in Luke 10:21 where Jesus is said to be full of joy in the Holy Spirit, and He cries, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (NIV). Because the Father has poured out so much love on Jesus, all He can do is echo this love back to His Father. That is the God we are talking about.

My friend, I hope you have begun to see that when you start with Jesus, the triune God that He makes known is not a weird math problem in which three must equal one, or a philosophical brain twister that makes your head spin. A Father who gives life with love to His Son in fellowship with the Spirit. That's the real God. When you start with Jesus, and in Him you discover a triune God, you have found a God of infinite beauty, love, and loveliness beyond compare.

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