

THE LIES WE BELIEVE

DR. CHRIS THURMAN

OVERCOME LIES LIKE THESE AND EXPERIENCE THE
EMOTIONAL HEALTH, INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS, AND
SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT YOU'VE BEEN SEEKING

“I must be PERFECT”

“My UNHAPPINESS is somebody else’s fault”

“My WORTH is determined by my PERFORMANCE”

“If our MARRIAGE takes hard work,
we must not be right for each other”

“GOD’S LOVE must be EARNED”

■ 202 THE LIES WE BELIEVE

Finally, like Scrooge, try to leap (via your imagination) to the end of your life. What will people remember about you after you die? What will your obituary say? How would a *Who’s Who* entry about you read at the end of your life? Put these dreams and goals into a list, for example, “was a loving spouse” or “became a millionaire” or “won a seat in Congress” or “wrote a best-selling novel” or “discovered a cure for AIDS” or “was named Teacher of the Year” or “visited twenty countries” or “discovered a rare archeological dig.” Put down on paper your greatest ambitions.

Now, here is a gift more valuable than you may have ever stopped to appreciate: you get to go on living. You have something more valuable than gold—life! You have time—time to pursue your goals and to fulfill your dreams. Yes, one day you are going to die. That painful truth can’t be escaped by any of us. But today, it really is lights, camera, action! You are being asked to step out on stage and give your best effort. You have the gift of life to use as meaningfully and abundantly as possible. With all that you have in you, give life your best shot.

Remember, pale death beats at your door. *Live!*

IS THERE AN ULTIMATE SOURCE OF TRUTH?

Keep one thing in view forever—the truth; and if you do this, though it may seem to lead you away from the opinion of men, it will assuredly conduct you to the throne of God.

—Horace Mann

I hope by this point in the book you are convinced that believing lies destroys your emotional health, intimate relationships with others, and closeness with God and that believing the truth enables you to have all three.

Yet a critically important question remains to be answered: Is there an ultimate source of truth? Carl Jung, one of the founders of modern psychology, got to the heart of the matter when he asked, “Are we related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question of life.”

I agree with Carl Jung—the most important question we can ask concerns whether or not an infinite being exists. If the answer is yes, then we have found our authority on truth, and we can stop looking. If the answer is no, then the field is wide open, and everyone’s version of “truth” needs to be considered.

Is there an infinite being who is the ultimate authority on truth? I’d like to give you my answer to that question by taking you back into my counseling office.

Where Does Truth Come From?

Do you remember my client Bill from Chapter 7? When I first introduced you to him, he was struggling with a major job setback, guilt over how he had handled a situation involving his son, and frustration toward his wife concerning pressure she was putting on him to buy a new home. I attempted to help Bill with his problems by encouraging him to discover and apply the truth to each situation that was bothering him.

Bill worked pretty hard in counseling to dedicate himself to the truth. Certain truths were especially important in helping him face his problems. We talked frequently about the truth “to err is human” in an effort to help him accept that making mistakes as a worker, a spouse, and a parent is unavoidable and no cause for self-condemnation. We spent a number of sessions on the truth “you don’t *have to*” to help Bill overcome the erroneous notion that he *had to* do what people wanted him to do, such as buy a new home when he knew it wasn’t the right thing to do at that time. We also explored the truth “you can’t please everyone” to enable him to defeat his self-destructive style of trying to keep everyone in his life happy. Finally, we worked pretty hard on facing the fact that “no pain, no gain,” to help Bill tackle problems head-on, whatever the cost may be, rather than run from them, hoping they will go away. He had put a lot of time and energy into counseling, and the dividends were showing. He was more peaceful, content, and confident, and his relationships with people at work, his wife, and his son had noticeably improved.

As our work together neared completion, Bill and I turned our attention to the focus of this chapter. Here is how it went: “Dr. Thurman, I feel that I’ve made a lot of progress in counseling. All my problems haven’t disappeared, but I’m a lot less driven to please everyone, more realistic about making mistakes, and freer from feeling that I have to do things just because people want me to. I’ve also come to appreciate that for good things to happen, I need to face problems head-on and be willing to go through some pain in the process.”

“You’ve worked hard to face the truth and apply it to your life, Bill. Your efforts have paid off nicely. I couldn’t be happier about the progress you’ve made.”

“There is something bothering me, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, you and I have worked diligently on the truth, and there is no doubt that it has helped. But outside of just using common sense or relying on people like yourself to help me, how can I really know what the truth is?”

“That’s a good question. I struggled with that same issue in my life at one point.”

“How did you resolve it?”

“I know psychologists are supposed to keep their personal convictions out of the counseling office, but I would like to answer your question honestly and directly.”

“Good. I’d like to hear what you think.”

“I realized somewhere along the way that neither my intellectual abilities nor anyone else’s are enough to reliably know what the truth is. What people

have called 'truth' throughout history changes too much, as have my own notions of truth. Five hundred years ago, the greatest thinkers of the day thought the earth was flat. So, as smart as people are, they aren't perfectly smart. In fact, people are pretty imperfectly smart."

"You don't trust people's ability to know what's true?"

"No, certainly not completely. People have not proven to be very good at getting the truth figured out. As much as we might want to trust human intelligence and reason as a way to know what's true, it often falls short. Sometimes it fails miserably. Some of the worst evils ever committed by mankind have been done in the name of what people thought the 'truth' was. So, no, I don't totally trust myself or others to know the truth."

"Who do you trust?"

"God."

"That simple, huh?"

"That simple."

Is There Any Proof God Exists?

"Why? I mean, how do you know He even exists, much less that He can help you with truth?"

"There are three main reasons I think He exists. The most basic is the universe itself and those of us who live in it. I don't think the universe created itself, and I don't believe we human beings came out of some primordial chemical swamp."

"You have a hard time believing what scientists have to say about the origin of life and how the universe came about."

"Yes, Bill, I do. Scientists change their minds a lot and don't even agree with one another on these matters. I sometimes wonder if they even believe their own theories. It is almost as if they just can't bring themselves to admit there is a God, so they have to come up with some way of explaining things without Him. As far as I'm concerned, some of their explanations for why the universe exists and how we humans came about require more faith than what is needed for believing in the existence of God."

"You don't trust their motives," Bill replied, starting to sound a lot like a counselor.

"No, I don't. The bottom line is that I believe the universe and those of us in it testify to the existence of a supremely intelligent being who brought everything into being. Let me give you an analogy for this. If I walk up to a golf course, I know somebody had to create it. It didn't just magically show up there as a result of some 'big bang' or whatever. Its beauty and its design tell me

someone very smart and creative was behind it. Same thing with humans. The beauty of how we are made, the design that went into us, the way all of our parts work together suggest an incredibly brilliant, creative designer. On that basis alone, I believe there is a God."

"You said there were 'reasons' you believe in the existence of God. What is another?"

"He made an appearance."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean God came here. He showed up on the planet."

"Christ, right?"

"Right. Not only did God make our universe, but He decided to show up in the person of Jesus Christ in order to prove His existence."

"How do you know Christ was God and not just some great person?"

"Well, while there have been a number of 'great' people throughout history who had a lot of valuable things to say about life, Christ was different."
"How?"

"He didn't just claim to know a lot of truth. He claimed to *be* truth."

"He equated Himself with truth?" Bill asked.

"Yes. He made no distinction between Himself and truth. That claim made Him either the greatest lunatic of all time or who He said He was—God in human form."

"Why didn't it mean He was a lunatic? After all, that is one grandiose claim."

"Not if it is true, and in Christ's case I believe it was true. I think He proved His claim a number of ways."

"How?"

"First, He lived a morally perfect life. That alone made Him different. No one had ever done that before, nor has anyone done it since. Second, He performed many miracles during His time on earth, thirty-five of which were recorded in the Bible. No human being could have done the things He did."

"Like walk on water, turn water into wine, and give sight to the blind?"

"Exactly. Performing miracles also made Him different and substantiated His claim as far as I'm concerned. But He did something even more miraculous than perform miracles. He came back from the dead, which He predicted He would do. I have never seen anyone pull that off, either."

"Neither have I. So you are saying that not only did He make the claim to be God, but He backed it up?"

"Yes. To me, all that He did is a pretty impressive résumé for the title of God that He claimed."

“You said there were three main reasons you believe God exists. What’s the third reason?”

“Changed lives.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen people significantly changed because of their belief in Christ. That is the modern-day miracle that Christ keeps performing, even though He is no longer here in a physical body. Christ brings about change in people’s lives that is truly miraculous. I have seen alcoholics quit drinking, rageaholics quit raging, selfish people learn to have concern for others, and fearful people become bold because of their commitment to Christ. My life has been changed because of my belief in Christ in ways that I cannot attribute to my efforts or power or understanding.”

“Isn’t that a lot of religious hocus-pocus? How do you know people who believe in Christ don’t change for some other reason? How do you know they changed because of their relationship with Christ?”

“I can’t categorically prove to you that these changes weren’t due to the power of believing or other factors, but the view I have had of these changes in my life and the lives of others tells me a supernatural force was at work bringing about the changes, not human effort alone.”

“So you put a lot of stock in Christ and what He had to say about the truth?”

“No, I haven’t put a ‘lot of stock’ in Christ. I’ve put all of my stock in Him. Christ is the centerpiece of my life. In fact, my faith in Christ dictates how I counsel people. It dictated the way I worked with you. My work with you has been based on truths straight from God, right out of the Bible.”

Applied Theology

“You mean to tell me that our work together has been based on what the Bible says?”

“Yes.”

“Give me some examples.”

“Okay. One of the basic principles we worked on together is the idea that what you think dictates how healthy you are and how well you handle life. The Bible is full of statements about how important it is to have the same attitude as Christ, to renew our minds, to take thoughts captive, and to set our minds on the truth and not lies. You were telling yourself a number of lies about things going on in your life, and you were paying a high price emotionally for having

done so. When you started seeing the truth and using it to deal with your problems, you became much more emotionally healthy. The Bible teaches that the truth sets people free, and you have proved that to a certain degree in your life.”

“So the Bible teaches that what we believe basically determines who we are and how well we handle things?”

“Yes, and it emphasizes truth as the ‘eyewear’ through which we need to view life.”

“What else about our work together came out of the Bible?”

“The specific truths I taught you all come from the Bible.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, not at all. For example, we worked on ‘to err is human,’ didn’t we?”

“Yes.”

“That is the human way of saying what the Bible is talking about in passages such as Romans 3:23 (NIV), where it says, ‘For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,’ and 1 John 1:8 (NIV), where it says, ‘If we claim to be without-sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.’ The Bible teaches that it is our natural bent to sin, to miss the moral mark.”

“So the Bible teaches that everyone messes up and that making mistakes is an inherent part of being a human being.”

“Yes, it does.”

“What other truths that we worked on came out of the Bible?”

“Well, we also worked on ‘you don’t have to.’ That truth is taught in the Bible as free will. The Bible teaches that God gave us free will and that we are free to do what we want to do, for better or for worse. We don’t have to do anything we don’t want to do. That is why I pushed you to see that you were free not to buy a new home if you didn’t feel it was right, even though your wife might not like it. You came in acting as if you had no free will, and I just tried to remind you that you do.”

“I assume there is another truth we worked on that came out of the Bible,” Bill said.

“Sure. We worked on the idea that you can’t please everyone. The Bible makes it clear that we are not here for people’s approval when it says in the books of Colossians and Galatians that we are to do things for God’s approval, not people’s, and that we can’t really serve God if we want the approval of people.”

“What else do you have up your sleeve about all this?”

“Well, I do have a final curveball that I want to throw your way.”

“I figured you did. Give me your best pitch.”

Human Effort Is Vain Effort

“Human effort alone to know the truth in any complete way is doomed to fail. We bring our finiteness and fallenness into the effort, and it ends up costing us a clear view of reality. God, on the other hand, brings neither finiteness nor fallenness into the issue of truth. He is the ultimate Source of all truth, and we need Him in our lives for help to know truth. He wants to help us figure out the truth. If we try to understand truth apart from God helping us, I think we labor in vain.”

“You’re saying that I need to take a very serious look at God and that if I am trying to make sense out of my life apart from Him, I am being foolish.”

“Yes, that’s right. Without God, there is no ultimate truth, no lasting power to live the truth, and no eternal life. That isn’t me talking. That is God talking.”

“Well, if God is truth, why do Christians who claim to believe in God seem as messed up as anyone else? I would think that with God on their side to help them know and do the truth, Christians would be the healthiest, most mature group of all.”

“That is the way it is supposed to work, Bill, but Christians can fall into just as many distorted ideas and beliefs as anybody else if they don’t dedicate themselves on a consistent basis to truth. Saying you believe in God and actually listening to Him and doing things His way, day by day, are two completely different things. Too many Christians are in the former group, and seemingly too few in the latter.”

“So the bottom line to the whole truth issue is God.”

“Yes, God is the bottom line. What He inspired people to write in the Bible was His way of telling us the truths we need to know for how to live meaningful, abundant lives. God owns the truth, and the Bible is His Owner’s Manual that He wants us to study so we can know how we are supposed to live.”

“There’s the answer to my question. You can know truth by pursuing God and studying the Book He wrote on truth.”

“Yes. How does all that sound to you?”

“Like a lot to think seriously about.”

What About You?

I want to make the same challenge to you that I made to Bill. I want to challenge you to take a serious look at who or what your source of truth is. Are you relying on human reason and understanding to know the truth, or are you relying on the ultimate Source of truth—God? If you are looking for the truth, God is

it. Don’t keep looking for truth in places that can’t ultimately satisfy you. Don’t listen to your common sense. Don’t listen to the “experts.” Listen to the Expert.

If you already believe in God, let me challenge you by suggesting that you may not be listening much better than the nonbeliever to what God is trying to say to you. You may know God is truth but still be listening to your thoughts or somebody else’s as your real source of truth. God’s thoughts have to become your own, or you will not be any healthier or more mature than those who don’t believe in God.

The psalmist wrote, “I have chosen the way of truth” (Ps. 119:30 NKJV). That is what I want for you—to choose the way of truth as the basis for your life. The way of truth pays huge dividends, that is certain. But more importantly, the way of truth takes you to God, the Source of all truth and eternal life. The way of truth provides it all—peace and contentment here on earth that go beyond our circumstances and eternal life in heaven that will be more wonderful than we can ever begin to grasp. Choose the way of truth and have it all.

Growthwork

The assignment for this chapter may well be the most important assignment of all. I want you to grab your journal and answer the following question: *Who is my source of truth?*

If your answer is God, then I want you to take the next step by answering the following question in your journal: *Do I really believe what God says?* Be completely honest in answering. Be willing to acknowledge areas of your life where you are living in ways that indicate you don’t truly believe what God says (being anxious about whether or not you will find a job when God promises to meet “all your needs,” or feeling worthless when God says you are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” or accumulating things here on earth when God says that we are to “lay up treasures in heaven”).

If your source of truth is *not* God, then I want you to take the next step by answering the following question: *Why do I trust myself or other people as my authority on truth?* Be honest in answering. If you are relying on yourself as the ultimate authority for discerning truth, why do you think you can trust yourself? If it is another person or a collection of people, why do you turn to them? What makes you or others smart enough, discerning enough, or wise enough to depend upon for knowing truth?

Whether you realize it or not, choosing your authority on truth is the single biggest decision you will ever make. Choose wisely—your *life* hangs in the balance.

As Gary retold the story to me, he made an astute observation: “Each one of the guys had a certain degree of distorted thinking in his view of God that was negatively impacting his life.”

I agreed with Gary. Each man in his Bible study seemed to think about God in a way that missed who He really is. According to those in Gary’s group, God rescues people from their problems, loves to punish, is out of touch with the modern world, likes to be a party pooper, and is aloof.

What was true about Gary’s Bible study group is also true about all of us. We all have some distorted perceptions of God. Thus, we don’t know who God really is. J. I. Packer, in his classic book *Knowing God*, makes clear the cost of not knowing God:

The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.¹

I believe that knowing God is central to mental and spiritual health. And knowing who God is, is central to knowing who we are. In this chapter, I want to address both issues. First, who is God? What is He *really* like? Second, who are we? What are we *really* like? Knowing who God is and who we are is non-negotiable if we want to live an abundant life. So, let’s put aside our biases, prejudices, stereotypes, and blind spots and see the truth about God and ourselves.

The Truth About God

We live in a world where there is a heightened interest in God. However, a popular belief is that God can be anything you want Him to be. Talk to fifty different people about God, and you will probably get fifty different descriptions of who He is. In the marketplace of views about God, you can choose from among a seemingly infinite number of versions.

We need the real God to stand up and be recognized, and He has. God stood up when He made the world and everything in it. God stood up for people to see when He chose the Jews as His people and did miraculous things for them and through them. God stood up in the human form of Christ when He came to earth to die for people’s sins. God stands up today through changed

THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD AND THE TRUTH ABOUT YOU

Christian truth, then is redemption truth because it requires not simply knowledge about something, but knowledge of someone. It is personal.

—Harold Cooke Phillips

I have a friend named Gary who likes to tell me about his men’s Bible study group that meets for breakfast on Wednesday mornings. On any given Wednesday, five to eight guys meet with Gary to discuss how God and the teachings of the Bible relate to their personal lives.

One Wednesday, Gary began the study with a question that was both simple and profound: *Who is God?*

The answers were fascinating.

“I think of God as a good guy,” Art answered. “He does anything He can to help us, bails us out of trouble when we mess up, makes everything right.”

“No, I see God very differently,” Jack chimed in. “God is very just. He wants me to live a pure life.” Then he added, “And if I don’t live up to that standard, He’ll punish me!”

“I don’t think of God that way,” Bart confessed. “I really see Him as more of an old-fashioned, uncool kind of grandpa. Don’t get me wrong, I believe He really loves me, but He’s just a little behind the times.”

Frank was next to speak. “I hate to admit this, but I’ve never viewed God as the kind and gentle type.” He paused and stated in a whisper, “Actually, I see God as more of a mean old man whose only purpose is to keep me from having any fun in life.”

Everyone had offered an opinion except Dave. Gary prompted him, “Dave, what’s your view on God?”

Dave sat in silence for another few seconds and then confessed, “God is real . . . I know that . . . but He feels very far away from me right now. Sometimes I feel as if He just doesn’t care about what we are doing or what is going on in our everyday lives. I wish He were closer.”

lives. Throughout it all, God inspired people to write about Him. Those writings are collected for us in the Bible and are available for our study.

We can have a picture of God relatively free from distortion if we want one. By relying on what God says about Himself in the Bible, we can know, however incompletely, who He really is. Understanding the attributes of God can be a tremendous source of comfort as we face problems. God is an awesome God. Let's look at some of His attributes, each of which warrants a whole book by itself.

God Is Self-Existent

Have you ever stopped to consider the fact that God has no beginning? He wasn't created—He has always existed. This prayer of Moses was recorded in the book of Psalms:

Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.²

John began his Gospel account by emphasizing that Jesus (the Word) was with God and was God from the beginning. He wrote,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.³

We are God's creation, but nothing created Him. God has always existed, "from everlasting to everlasting." He had no beginning, and He will have no end.

God Is All-Powerful

God can do anything He wants to do. When the Bible refers to God as "Almighty," it isn't kidding around or being loose with words—He is *all mighty*. Theologians refer to this as His *omnipotence*. Job, after his time of struggle with God, came to this conclusion about God: "I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You."⁴

If God wants to do something, He can do it. If He wants to turn water into wine, raise the dead, or move mountains, it is within His power to do so.

God Is Everywhere at Once

Have you ever felt that God was too busy for you? Sometimes we conjure up the mental picture of a long line of people, each waiting his turn to have a moment to speak with God, and God being able to give His attention to only one at a time while having to put the rest of the universe on hold.

But that's not the way it is. God is everywhere at once, and all of Him is there. Theologians call that His *omnipresence*. You don't have to wait for Him to finish with someone else before He can turn His attention to you. David wrote,

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.⁵

God has time for you. He fills up the whole universe and can be found anytime, anywhere.

God Is All-Knowing

God knows everything there is to know. Unlike us finite human beings who know but an infinitesimally small percentage of what can be known, God knows all 100 percent. Nothing that can be known has escaped Him. The psalmist acknowledged this in Psalm 147:5 (NKJV), saying, "Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite."

God knows so much more than we do, it isn't even fair to compare. The apostle Paul spoke of God's wisdom in this way:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!
"For who has known the mind of the LORD?
Or who has become His counselor?"
"Or who has first given to Him
And it shall be repaid to him?"
For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.⁶

course!). Well, another attribute of God that ought to comfort us (and scare us as well) is that He is just. When He metes out punishment, it is warranted and proportional to the wrong action: “Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”⁹

God punishes the guilty and rewards the righteous. People may get away with things here on earth, but there will be ultimate justice where all people will get their due someday.

God Is Merciful

God is also merciful. The justice of God means that He never punishes people who don’t deserve it or gives people *more* punishment than they deserve. The mercy of God means that He sometimes gives *less* punishment to wrongdoers than they deserve and *more* reward to “right doers” than they deserve. Paul wrote of this truth in Romans:

For he says to Moses,
 “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
 and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”¹⁰

Christianity is about God’s mercy—God offering us salvation and eternity in heaven when we deserved condemnation and eternity in hell. Peter wrote of God’s mercy in his first letter: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”¹¹

Thank God (literally) that He is merciful. Our situation would be worse than bleak for all of us if He wasn’t.

God Is Sovereign

Nothing is out of God’s control. The fact that He controls the universe is called *sovereignty*. It’s the same term one uses to describe a king over his dominion. God is in control and going to bring about His will regardless of what any of us do to get in His way. Consider these verses from a psalm:

Whatever the LORD pleases He does,
 In heaven and in earth,
 In the seas and in all deep places.¹²

Isn’t it comforting to know that the God of the universe isn’t ever going to be surprised by some new piece of information? God can’t be beaten in a debate because He knows all facts. It is stupid to argue with God because He is a couple of zillion times smarter than we are.

God Is Holy

God is *holy* in two senses of the word. First, there is no one like God. He is unique, one of a kind. Second, God is perfectly perfect. There are no impurities in Him.

No one is holy like the LORD,
 For there is none besides You,
 Nor is there any rock like our God.⁷

God is distinct from anything else, completely pure and righteous. He does only what is right. There is no one else like Him and no one who does right all the time as He does.

God Is Good

This attribute is one of my favorites because of its sheer simplicity. Among all the glowing terms used to describe God’s character, it’s nice to know He is just plain good.

Good and upright is the LORD;
 Therefore He teaches sinners in the way.⁸

Everything God does is good. There is not a mean “bone” in God’s makeup. He is always about the business of doing things that are for our good. I find that incredibly encouraging. Also, God can take anything that happens to us and ultimately bring good out of it. Remember Romans 8:28? “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (NIV)

Isn’t it comforting to know that in a world where people are sometimes out to harm you, God is always out to do you good?

God Is Just

If you’re like me, you feel bothered when you see people get away with doing wrong. We want to see people “get their due” (except for ourselves, of

Nothing can thwart God's plans. The die has been cast, and God was the One who cast it. God is in control, and everything is headed toward an incredible ending that He scripted. He's got the whole world in His hands.

God Is Unchanging

Have you ever attended a high school reunion? Isn't it an eye-opening experience? It's interesting to go back after ten, fifteen, or twenty years to see how people have changed. It's rather shocking to see the star athlete or head cheerleader at middle age carrying a few extra pounds around and looking a bit worse for wear. And, of course, who could have known back then that the quiet little guy or gal in the back of the room would become the highly respected medical doctor or chief executive officer of a major company? People do change!

But God stays the same. He doesn't change. Theologians call this His *immutability*. God is the same all the time in that He is never inconsistent or growing or developing. His words are recorded in the Old Testament:

For I am the LORD, I do not change;

Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.¹³

In the New Testament, James wrote about God's immutability when he said, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."¹⁴

Isn't it comforting to know that in a world that seems to change minute by minute, God is the same from age to age? We need that kind of stability.

God Is Love

I saved the best for last. God loves us. He is incapable of not loving us. Everything He does is for our best and is completely unselfish. Because of His love, He is greatly concerned about us and acts to help us. John put it this way: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."¹⁵

The best we get here on earth from other people is imperfect love. God loves us perfectly. His love is unconditional. It is constantly aimed at helping us become mature and free. We can count on it. We can't do a single thing to earn it. His love opens the door to a relationship with Him:

God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made

us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.¹⁶

I have presented these attributes of God to assist you in seeing God more clearly. Distortions about God cause real damage to emotional health and spiritual life. It's critically important to know who God really is and how that relates to us as human beings.

Now, let's turn our attention to what the Bible says about who we are.

The Truth About You

Patty is a hard-driving, anxiety-prone woman in her late thirties. On the outside, she appears to have it all together. She is a smart dresser, carries herself with an air of confidence, and is friendly and helpful to others. But deep down inside Patty is very different from her outward appearance. She is full of self-doubt and insecurity.

"I'm sure it goes back to my childhood," she started. "I was overweight, and kids made fun of me unmercifully."

"What sorts of memories do you have of growing up?" I asked.

"Bad memories—painful ones," she recalled. "I remember being called 'Fatty Patty' by the kids. I remember when they chose sides for playground games, I was always last to be picked. I can still see myself asking to be chosen, totally humiliating myself, just to be picked."

"Were your parents supportive of you at this time?" I inquired.

"Yes and no," Patty responded. "I know Mom and Dad loved me, but they tended to downplay what I was going through. I don't think they really understood the pain I was experiencing." She laughed and added, "I can still recall my mom telling me that everything would be all right. Then she would bring me a piece of pie or some cookies and say, 'Here, eat this. It'll help make things better.'" Patty began to softly sob into a tissue.

"It sounds to me like one of the only ways your mom knew how to comfort you was to give you sweets," I suggested.

"That's exactly how it was, Dr. Thurman. She said 'I love you' by giving me desserts. She would say how she never had dessert growing up during the Great Depression. She was so proud that she could do that for me. And of course, I would eat every bite."

"Please go on with your story."

"Well, the main issue is that I still feel the same way today as I did back

then. When I went off to college, I lost a lot of weight and began to take real pride in my appearance. I've been real disciplined in my diet and exercise. A lot of good things have happened to me in my adult life. But I'm still the little fat girl deep down inside. I feel that I don't have anything to offer."

"Do you really believe that?"

She paused. "Yes, I'm afraid I really do. I just feel like a big zero—a loser." I can't begin to estimate how many people I've spoken with whose story is similar to Patty's. The details vary, but the bottom-line self-perception is still the same: I'm a zero. It may be tied to appearance issues, such as being overweight, having crooked teeth, being short, or having too many freckles. It may be tied to achievement issues, such as not getting a college degree, being on the lower rung of the climb to success, or not making enough money. It may be tied to relationship issues, such as being lonely, being rejected by someone, or experiencing inconsistent love from others. Whatever the issue, too many of us have ended up with a distorted perception of who we really are that must be corrected if we hope to enjoy a fuller, healthier life.

Seeing yourself as you really are is essential to mental and spiritual health. The only way you can see yourself accurately is through the teachings of the Bible. Let me warn you—some of the news is bad. What the Bible says about us sometimes stings badly. Yet for those who turn their lives over to God, the news couldn't be better. Let's go into both the good and the bad news about ourselves.

You Are a Special Creation of God

One of the "good news" passages concerning who we are is found in Psalm 139. Here King David stated some important truths:

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.

When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,

your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.¹⁷

God doesn't make junk! We have all heard that before, but it is really true. His works are wonderful, and we are the apex of all His works! No one needs to walk around thinking he is "a zero" because God doesn't make "zeros."

Not only are we "fearfully and wonderfully made," but I believe this passage teaches that God made each of us a unique individual. Though we human beings are alike in many ways, no one else is exactly like us, either. As trite as it sounds, when God made you, He broke the mold.

You may be thinking, *Thank goodness no one else is like me—I'm such a loser*, but the truth of the matter is that you are a very special creation of God and there is no duplicate. In a world where too many things have a look of sameness, it is worth feeling good about the fact that God created you to be the only *you* on the planet.

You Are Adam's Offspring

Now, for some *really* bad news. According to the Bible, each person is born corrupt. When Adam and Eve committed the original (first) sin, it devastated everything and has negatively impacted all mankind since then. We are all born with a sinful nature. David put it this way: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."¹⁸

So, the horrible truth of it is that we are not basically "good." We are basically "bad" in that we are bent in the direction of sin from birth. Adam and Eve messed it up for all of us, and things have been a fractured mess here on earth ever since. The Westminster Confession says it so much more articulately than I can:

By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed to all actual transgressions.¹⁹

All this is worse news than most of us realize. The Bible teaches that every one of us is born "in Adam," spiritually dead and an enemy of God. We are sinners, not people who happen to sin. Our nature is morally corrupt, not good. Everything about us—mind, will, emotions, and body—has been horribly dis-

figured by the original sin of Adam and Eve. While we do not act as immorally as we could (no one is totally depraved), we all act badly. In Romans 3:10–12 (NKJV), Paul said straightforwardly,

There is none righteous, no, not one;
 There is none who understands;
 There is none who seeks after God.
 They have all turned aside;
 They have together become unprofitable;
 There is none who does good, no, not one.

Because of all of this, Christ's coming was good news (actually, it was incredible, awesome, unbelievable news). If we are spiritually dead sinners at birth, we need something to bring us back to life, or we go to hell forever. Christ's atoning death on the cross is the "something" that was necessary to allow us new life and heaven for eternity.

You Are of Infinite Value to God

I want to ask you a question that isn't easy to answer. It will require some thought, but I want you to be as honest as possible. What do you think you're worth? Don't answer in dollar-and-cents terms, but in broader terms.

The value of an object is often reflected by the price we are willing to pay for it. Have you ever considered what God was willing to "pay" for you? Look at Paul's words: "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time."²⁰

God "ransomed" you with the most valuable thing He had, His Son, to die for our sins. God paid the highest price possible to redeem our souls. That ought to tell us something. I sure wouldn't offer the life of one of my children as a ransom unless it was for something of utmost value. Even then, it would kill me to do so. It had to have been torturous for God the Father to send His Son to die for our sins, yet God doing that tells us how much we must be worth to Him.

From here on, the things I go into are true only about people who have put their faith in Christ and have become Christians. I am not trying to be mean-spirited here. It's just that the Bible is exclusionary. It excludes people from heaven on the basis of whether or not they have put their faith in Jesus Christ. If you put your faith in Christ, you're in. If you didn't, you're out. If you did,

there are things that are true about you now that are not true about the non-Christian. Not my idea—God's.

You Are God's Child

Have you ever been at a party where people play games that are made up of fantasy questions? They'll ask questions such as, "If you could be any person in history, who would you be?" or "If you were a type of car, what kind would you be?" Here's one I want you to answer: If you could choose any person from history to be your father, who would you choose?

I have no idea who you chose as your fantasy father. Maybe you chose a king or a president or a movie star or a sports hero or a minister. But let's leave fantasyland and look at the truth. Besides your earthly father, there is another Father who adopted you when you became a Christian. Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Ephesians: "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."²¹

One of Jesus' disciples, John, wrote about this great truth as well. From his words, you can tell how astonished John was about this: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"²²

So, if you are a Christian, you now have God for your Father. You now have an all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere at once, just, merciful, good, in control, unchanging, and perfectly loving Dad. How does that compare to the one you chose when I posed the question to you?

You Are a Brother or Sister to Christ

Many times people who are down on themselves walk around carrying a lot of shame. They dwell on bad things they've done or bad things that have happened to them. This issue of shame becomes particularly potent when we think of our relationship with God. We convince ourselves that God is so upset with us over what we've done that He is actually ashamed of us! Read the words of the writer to the Hebrews:

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."²³

That's a passage loaded with powerful truth! Jesus Christ, God the Son, is not ashamed to call you His brother or sister. You are in the family of God, have God the Father as your Dad, and Christ as your Brother. That would make a pretty incredible family portrait, wouldn't you say?

You Are a Joint Heir with Christ

Have you ever been jealous of someone who appeared to have it all? You know the kind of person I'm talking about. He wears all the right clothes, drives the right car, lives in the right neighborhood, eats at the right restaurants, hangs out with all the right people. I remember seeing someone like this and later found out that this person had inherited all his money. Just think of it. All he did to have it all was to be born into the right family, and then he simply inherited all that he had!

That's what it means to be an heir. You inherit what is legally or naturally a part of your parents' estate. Think of the spiritual implications of this concept. With God as your Father, you inherit everything from Him. Paul wrote of this in his letter to the Galatians: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir."²⁴

You are a joint heir with Christ, which means that everything He has is yours as well, and He has it all. Man, are you loaded!

You Have the Holy Spirit As a Guarantee That You Belong to God

When you became a Christian, the Holy Spirit of God took up residence in your heart. God isn't just up in heaven on His throne. He is now inside you sitting on the throne of your heart. The Holy Spirit living inside you means that you have a constant companion who is there whenever you need Him. Isn't that a comforting truth? The key passage about this truth is in Ephesians:

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.²⁵

We hear a lot about guarantees in commercials and advertisements. It's the sponsor's way of saying he stands behind his product. Isn't it great that God stands behind our salvation by giving us the Holy Spirit as His guarantee?

You Have Christ's Life within You

Another life-changing truth out of the Bible is that when we became Christians, we were made "new creatures" in Christ and have the life of Christ in us. The important passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians on this point states, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."²⁶

As Jesus lives in you, He will change you. You aren't hopelessly bound to your past or your weaknesses. Ask God to help you believe that Jesus lives in you and that you can change. Thank Him that Jesus not only showed us how to live when He was on the earth, but by living within us, Christ enables us to live like Him today. In that sense, we imitate Him and are to live with the question, "What would Jesus do?" hanging over every action.

You Have Christ's Righteousness

Part of seeing yourself in an emotionally and spiritually healthy way is seeing yourself realistically. Too many of us tend to dwell on the shortcomings in our lives. This sort of distorted thinking is damaging and defeating.

According to the Bible, those who are in Christ now have His righteousness credited to them. According to the apostle Paul, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."²⁷

When Jesus, as your substitute, took your sin, you received His perfect righteousness. This is the core of the Bible's teaching—your acceptance by God is because of Christ, not because of your performance.

You Will Never Be Condemned by God

We don't like to have stones thrown our way. The pain of making a mistake is bad enough without somebody rubbing our faces in it. Another incredible truth for us as Christians is that no matter how badly we act, there are no stones coming our way from God. God will discipline us when we do wrong, but He will not condemn us. Paul stated in clear terms to the Romans: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."²⁸

Isn't it good to know that condemnation is now a thing of the past and that we won't experience it anymore unless we do it to ourselves or others choose to do it to us? God is not a stone thrower.

You Are a Foreigner in This World

Earlier in this book we talked about the need some of us have to be loved and accepted by *everybody*. Having the love and approval of everyone is quite an unrealistic expectation and a self-destructive thing to do to ourselves. Read this important truth: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.”²⁹

Once, as part of the world, you were a stranger and foreigner to God. Now, as a Christian, you are a stranger and foreigner in this world. Because you are a Christian, you are now a displaced person or a migrant because your citizenship is in heaven! Because you are in God’s family, you now live under different values and priorities. As a result, you will be misunderstood, even persecuted and rejected, by those in the world who are not Christians.

You Have Special God-Given Abilities

You have a very special role in the family of God. God has equipped you with certain gifts that enable you to fulfill your special role. Although no individual has all of God’s spiritual endowments, your gifts have been especially designed by God to benefit the family of God in some way:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.³⁰

No member of God’s family is useless or unnecessary. You were created by God to make a valuable contribution to the body of Christ. You may have been gifted to teach, serve, administrate, give of your resources, or encourage, but you have something special to offer as a Christian to other Christians.

You Are an Ambassador

Have you ever visited Washington, D.C.? It’s quite an experience to be in our nation’s capital and see government in action. I think part of the excitement is getting to see the pomp and pageantry that so often occur in governmental events. Whether it’s a military parade, a long limousine with tiny American flags waving on the hood, or a stirring version of the National Anthem, it is a privilege to be an American.

If you’re reading this right now in your house or apartment, do you realize you are in an embassy? That’s right—for you, as a Christian, are an ambassador.

Paul told the Corinthians, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”³¹

If you have ever wondered why you are here on this planet, it is to be an ambassador for Christ. That is your calling. It is your most important task. Sure, you may be a teacher, lawyer, nurse, or accountant in your job, but your main position in life is that of ambassador. Let the pomp and circumstance begin.

You Can Confidently Ask God for Help

Some of us live our lives as if we are burdens and we should never let our needs be known because we might inconvenience somebody. “I don’t want to trouble anyone” is a comment you may have said on occasion.

These feelings of being a burden can surface in the spiritual life as well. We may find ourselves saying, “I don’t want to bother God with my problems.” But the truth is, God desires to hear from us—about everything. We learn from the writer to the Hebrews: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”³²

God’s throne is a throne of help. God wants you to approach and present your needs to Him. The last thing God wants us, as His children, to think is that we will be irritations or burdens to Him. God wants to help us in our time of need.

Let’s take a minute to review all that we have learned about who God is and who you are.

God is	self-existent all-powerful everywhere at once all-knowing holy good just merciful sovereign unchanging love
You	are a special creation of God are Adam’s offspring

are of infinite value
(Christians Only)
 are a child of God
 are a brother or sister to Jesus
 are a joint heir with Christ
 have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that
 you belong to God
 have Christ's life within you
 have Christ's righteousness
 will never be condemned by God
 are a foreigner in this world
 have special God-given abilities
 are an ambassador
 can confidently ask God for help

Quite an impressive list, wouldn't you say? Now, ask yourself the following questions: *Do I really believe any of this? Do I really believe God is all-powerful? Do I really believe God is good? Do I really believe God is in control? Do I really believe that I am a wonderfully made, unique creation of God? Do I really believe I am worth more than riches to Him? As I Christian, do I really believe I have the Holy Spirit in me as a guarantee that I am God's child and am going to heaven someday? As a Christian, do I really believe there is no condemnation for me anymore?*

If the answer to any of the questions is no, you may want to take some time and think about why. Why don't you believe these truths? Is God a liar? Is the Bible untrue? Grapple with this at the deepest level of your soul. If anything taught about God or yourself in this chapter is something you don't believe, you are living your life as if God is a liar. Do you really want to live that way?

Growthwork

Look back over the list of God's attributes that we covered and select the one you have the most trouble believing. In your journal, write down your thoughts about why you find it hard to believe that about God. How would your life be different if you really believed that about God?

Now, do the same thing with the list we covered concerning you. What on that list do you have the hardest time believing? Why is it hard to believe? How would your life be different if you really believed it?

A final assignment I would also like you to do is to memorize the Bible verse I gave for the attribute of God you have the most trouble with and the Bible verse that goes with the truth about you that you have the most difficult time accepting. After you memorize these verses, meditate on them. Chew on each verse for five minutes each (longer if you would like). Try to get everything you can out of each verse. Allow God to use these verses to turn on the light in your mind about who He is and who you are. Run these verses through your mind as often as you can each day, like playing a favorite tape in your car stereo every chance you get.

Knowing God for who He really is, is the one assignment in life we cannot afford to skip. In knowing God, we come to know who we are. You can't really know yourself apart from knowing God. Distorted thinking in one area means distorted thinking in another. If you misperceive who God is, you won't see yourself for who you are. If you misperceive who you are, you won't be able to see God for who He is.

Know God! Know Yourself!