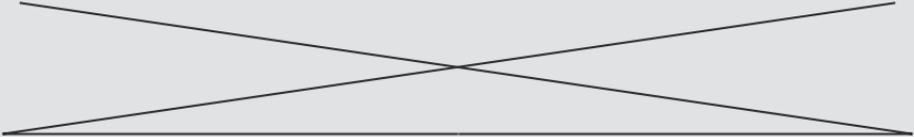


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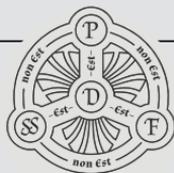
JOE THORN



EXPERIENCING

— **THE** —

TRINITY



**THE GRACE OF GOD
FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

“All Christians believe in the Trinity, but most Christians, if we’re honest, don’t like to think about the Trinity that much. The doctrine seems abstract, dry, and distant from everyday life. This book will change that for you. Joe Thorn points us to the joy of a God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, showing us how this truth should prompt us to worship, pray, and trust. He applies this great doctrine without putting us out of its mystery. This book can better equip you to praise the God from whom all blessings flow.”

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“*Experiencing the Trinity* will help us focus on God in the midst of the dark clouds and thundering waves that threaten to sink us. The book you hold now is short, but the truths contained therein are neither flippant nor light. It’s just the kind of ballast you need in life’s storms.”

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Tom J. Nettles, Professor of Historical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *By His Grace and for His Glory*

EXPERIENCING THE TRINITY

EXPERIENCING
— THE —
TRINITY

**THE GRACE OF GOD
FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

JOE THORN

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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To
Katherine, Elias, Madeline, and Kilian.
May you always know the love and grace
of our triune God.

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Introduction

I am intending to speak to none but myself, and therefore shall only observe what is useful to my own heart and practice.¹

Richard Baxter

What I have written here, I have primarily written for and to myself. I needed to hear these words during a desperate period of my life, and though that particular time of affliction has passed, I continue to need them today. I hope that these reflections on the grace of our triune God will encourage those who find themselves battling fear, anxiety, temptation, affliction, and doubt. I am there with you, but more importantly, so is the Lord.

The Dark Night of My Soul

In 2011, shortly after the publication of my first book, *Note to Self*, I started to fall apart. While walking down

¹Richard Baxter, *Dying Thoughts* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 2.

Wabash Avenue in Chicago my hands began to shake, and I grew exceedingly fearful. This sense of dread came upon me suddenly and did not abate, and I had to make it through one more appointment. I made it through that meeting by sitting on my hands and wearing my best poker face. Immediately after the appointment I called my wife to tell her what I was experiencing. On the train ride home I prayed a lot, knowing I was heading into something painful.

This was the beginning of the most difficult season in my personal life. My marriage and family were healthy and our church was vital and growing, yet I felt like I was withering and dying. I lost every form of confidence I had in the things God had called me to do and was oppressed by an abiding sense of fear and deep anxiety. Regular and easy meetings with people in the congregation left me terribly anxious, and regardless of how pleasant or successful they were, I left each meeting feeling like a failure. I experienced little sleep during this time. I began doubting my calling, and was afraid that I would not be able to lead the church into its next stage of life.

For the first time in my life I was the weakest man I knew. I was truly frail. This led me to cry out to the Lord and “preach to myself” more than any other time. Yet relief was often slow in coming. I would pour over

pages of Scripture and lie face down waiting for God to refresh my heart, assure my soul, and lift my head. Sometimes I was blessed with peace, other times I was left in my condition. It was as if I were walking in darkness and afraid of falling off a cliff, and although the promise of light was given, I was still waiting for it to break through the night.

The Way Out of Darkness

A friend told me to reach out to Dr. David Murray, professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was surprised to find out he had read my book and had an idea of who I was. As we talked, he asked me dozens of questions to get a better understanding of what I was going through and what my habits were. Over the next several months David became a lifeline of wisdom and a friend for whom I am forever grateful. God led me out of the darkness through my family, my church, my friends, my doctor, and especially Dr. Murray.

The simplest way to explain how I wound up in such trouble is to say that I had been working too hard for too long without resting. Some people call it burnout. My body and soul were suffering, and things needed to change. I had to delegate a number of responsibilities,

adjust my sleep habits, take Sabbath rest seriously, and restructure my schedule—all while maintaining communion with Christ through prayer and the Word. With these changes I experienced some relief, but still woke up in the middle of the night with heart palpitations, and much of my fear remained with me. After consulting with Dr. Murray and my physician I began taking medication for anxiety.

Taking prescription drugs for my mental health had never before been an option. I saw all of my battles as only spiritual, with no real physical component. I wanted to trust God and experience his deliverance, but in the midst of my praying, repenting, believing, and pouring over the Word of God, relief was slow in coming. Dr. Murray helped me to think through this biblically and theologically. On his recommendation, I read Richard Baxter's *The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow by Faith and Physic*. I was surprised to find that the well-known Puritan argued that medicine is sometimes needed in the cure of those suffering from what we now call mental illness. Baxter explains:

If other means will not do, neglect not physic [medicine]; and though they will be averse to it, as believing that the disease is only in the mind, they must be persuaded or forced to it. I have known the lady deep in melancholy, who a long time would neither

speak, nor take physic, nor endure her husband to go out of the room, and with the restraint and grief he died, and she was cured by physic put down her throat with a pipe by force.²

No one had to get out a pipe, but it took quite a bit of time and prayer before I was willing to seriously consider the idea that my brain wasn't functioning properly and that medicine might be a critical part of my journey toward health. In fact, it was.

Of course, medicine alone didn't fix me. A new schedule didn't really free me. God used a number of changes that worked together to rebuild me. And central to it all was the Word of God. It was Scripture that drew me back to the hope, peace, and safety I have in Jesus. And that is what this book is really about: how the Word of God draws us to the living God. In knowing him we find peace, joy, strength, and faith.

Yet the power of God's Word is not seen in the immediacy of its work. Preaching God's Word to yourself is not necessarily a quick fix for your sorrows and suffering. At times God will delay granting you relief in order to draw you closer to himself. He might want to teach you just how helpless you really are and how all-sufficient he really is. Sometimes God will allow you to

²Richard Baxter, *The Cure of Melancholy and Overmuch Sorrow by Faith and Physic in The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 17 (London: James Duncan, 1830). Kindle edition.

suffer for a season to test and strengthen your faith. I am thankful that I have learned that belief is easy when life is easy, but when life is confusing and painful, faith will prove itself to be either rooted in Jesus Christ or resting on religious sentiments.

I can now praise the Lord for his delay of peace, for it not only tested my faith, but made the grace he finally did give that much sweeter.

Notes to Myself

What follows are fifty daily readings that reflect on God and the gospel and how they overcome our fear, failure, pain, and unbelief. Much of this I preached to myself over the last couple of years, and all of it is directed toward my own heart. So, for instance, when I write “there is a kind of deficiency in your christology,” I’m referring primarily to my own weakness. But if you find yourself with a heart like mine, weak and in need of grace, I pray these readings will be an encouragement to you. For God offers his grace to people like us.

He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy. (Ps. 72:13)

But allow me to be clear from the start. As this little book is written to myself, it comes from the perspective of a Christian and it is written to a Christian. If you

have not yet believed in Jesus Christ as the only hope of being reconciled to God, I encourage you to read the following pages as the promises God makes to those who believe. Until you believe in Jesus, these promises remain only a potential reality for you. They are not yet yours, but they are offered to you. You must receive them by trusting in Jesus Christ yourself. Believing in Jesus is not choosing a new religion, but seeing your own sin and just condemnation before God. It is awakening to your idolatry and seeing the worthiness of the one true God. Trusting in Jesus means believing that your only hope to stand before the face of God and experience mercy is found in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son.

What I hope you will discover—what I continue to learn over and over again—is that all of us are far weaker than we know. Our sin, which is much darker and goes much deeper than we realize, is the real source of our most significant weakness. Neither you nor I can measure up to God's standards. We are trapped in our condition of guilt, and the only hope is the offer of grace by our triune God.

Part 1

GOD THE FATHER

He Is Holy

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!

Isaiah 6:3

You don't have an Isaiah 6 experience with God very often. I'm not referring to prophetic visions; I'm talking about having an encounter with God as *holy*. I mean an intense and transformative interaction with the Lord who dwells in unapproachable light—the kind of experience that drops you to your knees in the fear of God and moves you to confess your sins. Do you even remember the last time you said, “Woe is me”? Have you ever said it?

Despite the books, sermons, and songs that highlight the holiness of God, this doctrine remains too infrequently on your mind, and it insufficiently informs how you approach and live for God. It's not enough that

you properly define God's holiness. Reading Dr. Sproul's classic treatment of the subject is wonderful, but this central aspect of God's character must also be experienced.¹ The less you are gripped with God's holiness, the less awe you will experience in your faith. A truer sight of his holiness will give you a truer sight of your corruptions. And it is only as you see both of these realities that you will find his mercy extended toward you in Jesus Christ to be soul-satisfying and worship-inspiring.

Awe of God proceeds from knowing and experiencing his holiness—his *otherness*. He is unlike people in many ways. He is high and lifted up in his sovereignty, justice, and goodness. He is pure. There is no darkness in the Lord. He is perfect in every way. To see even a vision of him, as Isaiah did, makes your legs weak and jaw drop. And if all you saw were his holiness in contrast to your sinfulness, you would despair and lose all hope of living before him.

But the holiness of God includes his mercy and grace. He is not only the Lord of justice, but also the Lord of compassion. He cleanses the filthy and pardons the guilty. He purifies his people and clothes them in the righteousness of his Son, Jesus, making them acceptable in his presence. The holiness of God lifts the soul in worship, for holiness is the sum of all he is.

¹R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2001).

Look to your holy God. Behold his glory. He is more than you can comprehend, and what he has shown you of himself is enough to forever change you. Behold his glory. The whole earth is full of it, but does his glory fill your mind and heart?

He Is Creator

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 40:28

That God created the heavens and the earth is one of the most important doctrines revealed in the Bible. It's a shame you seldom think so. God as Creator is not throwaway theology. It isn't just teaching for the kids. Yes, it's critical Sunday school instruction, but the church gives it to young people early so that they will hold on to it throughout their lives. To say God is Creator is to say he is the one in whom you find your identity and purpose.

Your God has not only created the world, but he has also created you. You exist because God chose to make you. And when he made you, he made you for himself. Meditate on this. You were made for your Maker's plea-

sure. You are here for the sake of Another. And this doesn't diminish your purpose or value in life. In fact, it heightens it. It's counterintuitive, I know, but stop listening to the world for a minute.

One of the lies the world continually presents is that you are not only in control, but that you indeed are your own master. You say to yourself, "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul."¹ It makes for interesting poetry, but it also makes for a life that will fail in the most significant ways.

You did not create yourself, and you cannot re-create yourself. Your value is not found in your uniqueness or your individuality. It is found in the God who created you in his own image. Yes, you are special, *sacred* really, but this is because you, in amazing ways, look like the God who made you. And this is not your uniqueness. In fact this is what makes you common—like every other person on earth. You were made by God, for God.

Sadly, you do not live the life your Creator intended. You have often attempted to set the course of your life as if you were the captain. Such rebellion is what mars the image of God. You were created for a person and with a purpose, but you have often worked to undo much of that. But do not despair. The God who creates also re-creates. He has caused you to be born again.

¹William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*, 1888.

He has given you a new heart. He has made you something new.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Cor. 5:17)

To know God as Creator is to recognize that you are his creature. As a Christian you are doubly his, for he has made you and remade you for his glory. You truly are his workmanship.

Part 2

GOD THE SON

His Humanity

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:5

Do you know the man Jesus? It makes you a little uncomfortable to even read that, doesn't it? The *man*. You immediately want to say, "He's fully God as well as fully man!" Yes, indeed. But there is a kind of deficiency in your christology that sees much of Christ's deity but little of his humanity. And if you disregard the humanity of Jesus Christ, you will find yourself with half a Savior.

Jesus, in his humanity, experienced adversity, abandonment, and affliction. He knew poverty and hunger, loneliness and betrayal, temptation and satanic attack, divine wrath and death. The Son of God took on flesh to experience all of this and much more, for you.

The Son could not have ransomed sinful men and

women without himself becoming one of us. To be a suitable substitute he needed to be made like us in every way (Heb. 2:17). Only “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5) could fulfill the law on our behalf, take on the punishment of our sins, and rise from death for us who need life. This is why Jesus is the perfect mediator between you and your Maker.

To see the greatness of the Savior you must know both his divine nature and his human nature. The human nature of Jesus Christ shows you the depths of his love and the beauty of his humility. Do you want to see God? Look to Jesus. Do you want to see what perfected humanity looks like? Look to Jesus.

The man Christ Jesus is therefore both Savior and example. He has taken your place in his life, death, and resurrection, but he has also shown you the way of faith and godliness.

His Deity

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Titus 2:11–14

You love the idea that Jesus is the friend of sinners. You should; this is your only hope as a sinner. His grace has appeared to set the condemned free, to rescue the enslaved. You truly are saved by grace. But this Friend is not just a savior, but the *Savior*. Jesus, “our great God,”

has set his people free not only from sin and judgment but also from the tyranny of sin and lawless living. He is the God who gave us law and saved us from our lawbreaking so that we might become his law-keeping people.

Why did our great God appear and bring redemption? To purify for himself a people zealous for good works. You see, what makes this gospel the antithesis of other religions is not only that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone, but also that we are saved unto God-empowered good works over the dead works of self-powered obedience.

I know that you sometimes feel as if there is no hope for your growth in godliness. You believe that your sin will always get the better of you. But the God who saves has saved you with a purpose and a power that changes the soul and produces godliness. The God who made you a new creation will continue his work of salvation in you. Jesus has saved you and is saving you. Do you believe this?

Do you know the promises that are made to you in your great God and Savior? That he will cleanse you from your idols, put his Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in his ways (Ezek. 36:22-32)? That he prepares good works for you to walk in, and gives you grace to do so (Eph. 2:8-10)? God has not saved you and left

you powerless to obey. He has saved you so that you can and will obey. Only God can do this. Religion can't do it. Commitment can't produce it. But Jesus has saved you for this purpose.

Look ahead to what lies before you, and see how God would have you live. By his grace you can do it. This isn't positive thinking, nor is it antigrace. It is resting in and acting upon the grace that Jesus Christ gives his people.

Part 3

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

He Regenerates

You must be born again.

John 3:7

The world often makes a big deal out of near-death experiences. But you have experienced something far greater. You have gone from true death to true life by the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration. The Spirit's work of regeneration is the instantaneous life-giving work of renewal. You experienced this at a specific point in time—that moment when you were brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. When Jesus said one “must be born again,” he implied that this is not a decision to make but a gift to receive. In fact, it is this gift, this sovereign change of your heart, that led to your faith. You believe because God made you alive by his Spirit.

Get this. God chose to give you life. This irrevocable gift of life has forever changed you. You are now a new

creation, with a new heart that loves, new eyes that see, and new power that motivates what you do. That you have been born again is not merely a spiritual experience, a thing that happened and changed your perspective. It is a transformation of your soul, and because of it you are not who you once were.

One must be born again to see the kingdom of heaven. There is no sight apart from this work. There is no life apart from it. And this is why you pray to God for regeneration. This is why you can have real hope in evangelism and church growth. God grants salvation. The Spirit of God gives new life; he causes people to be born again (John 3:6–8; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3). And since this is the sovereign working of God, something far beyond your control, you pray that he would do what only he can do.

Do you long for the salvation of your loved ones? Are you anxious about the eternal state of people you care about? Do you share the gospel with the hope that many will believe? Then you must pray for the Holy Spirit to regenerate them. By asking him to do a work that he alone can do, you move out of the realm of wishing people would believe to seeking their faith by the work of God.

He Indwells

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

John 14:16–17

To say that the universe is vast is a gross understatement. Scientists say that just our galaxy, the Milky Way, is one hundred thousand light years across in size and contains hundreds of billions of stars and planets. Even if you could travel at the speed of light, it would take you one hundred thousand years to cross our galaxy. How many galaxies are there in the universe? Hundreds of billions. This can make you feel very small.

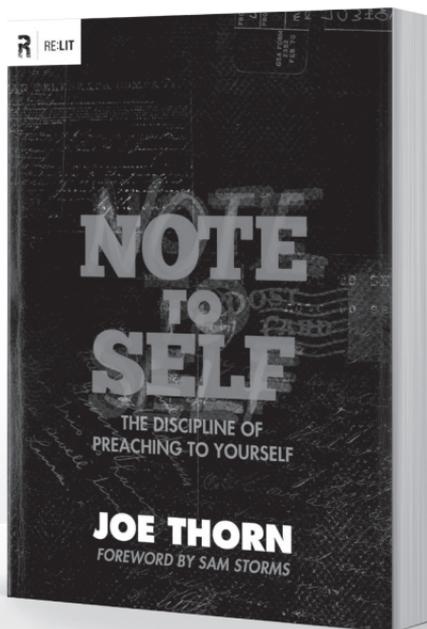
Then consider the God who made it all. He is not bound by time or space. He exists eternally and everywhere simultaneously. Nothing can contain him. This can make you feel even smaller. But now consider that God has spoken. He has spoken to us through the prophets and ultimately through his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–2). We human beings are small, and the Lord is high and exalted beyond our wildest imaginations. And yet he stoops down and takes notice of us. “What is man, that you are mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4). Though he is highly exalted, he has condescended not only to speak to us, but also to save us from our ruin and misery. And he not only saves us, but he stays with us.

One of the great promises of the gospel is that God dwells with you and in you. The Maker of all things, whose very nature is eternal, chooses to make his home in small, finite, broken people. In you. God the Holy Spirit dwells in his people in order that his presence with them can be as intimate as possible. He is closer than you can imagine. He is present to enlighten and empower you. He is called your Helper.

As you face temptation, you must know that you do not face it alone. The same Spirit that empowered Jesus when he was tempted empowers you. He is present and powerful in you. Though you sometimes feel

isolated, you are never alone. Though you know your own weakness, you are not left without power. The eternal, immortal, invisible God is with you now. Whatever comes next, you will not face it alone.

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“All Christians believe in the Trinity, but most Christians, if we're honest, don't like to think about the Trinity that much. Thorn points us to the joy of a God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, showing us how this truth should prompt us to worship, pray, and trust.”

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JOE THORN (MDiv, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the founding and lead pastor of Redeemer Fellowship in St. Charles, Illinois. He is an active blogger at JoeThorn.net, a contributor to *The Story ESV Bible* and *The Mission of God Study Bible*, and the author of *Note to Self: The Discipline of Preaching to Yourself*.

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