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The background is a complex collage of textures and colors. It features large, semi-transparent purple and blue shapes overlaid on a base of orange and brown tones. There are also areas of grey and white, suggesting peeling paint or concrete. In the center, a small, detailed image of a skyscraper is visible through a purple shape. The overall composition is abstract and layered.

**CORNELIUS  
PLANTINGA JR**



**DEEP**

**CORNELIUS  
PLANTINGA JR**

**DOWN**

**FAITH**



Grand Rapids, Michigan

We are grateful to Bob Rozema for his work writing new content, updating pedagogy, and helping to shape the transformation of *A Sure Thing* into *Deep Down Faith*. A long-time editor for Faith Alive/CRC Publications, Mr. Rozema has worked on many projects over the years and continues to serve the church through his writing and editing.

We are also grateful to Dr. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. for his work on the original *A Sure Thing*. Dr. Plantinga has served Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, as its president and as associate Professor of Systematic Theology. He is also the author of several books, including *Beyond Doubt: Faith-Building Devotions on Questions Christians Ask*.

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# PREFACE

*Deep Down Faith* is a new edition of Dr. Cornelius Plantinga Jr.'s *A Sure Thing*, originally published by Faith Alive in 1986 and reprinted in 2001. Over the years, this book has become a classic text for teaching young people the essentials of the Reformed faith. With accessible language, unforgettable illustrations, and vibrant stories, Plantinga makes these venerable and treasured doctrines sing with relevance and urgency to today's youth.

This new edition features updated language and illustrations, as well as a new online study guide. *Deep Down Faith* will be especially useful to older teens and young adults for devotional reading or as a guide for discussion in small group or one-on-one mentoring settings. It can also be used as a textbook for church education classes in Reformed doctrine, or in preparation for making Public Profession of Faith or Confirmation.

Faith Alive is pleased to offer this classic in a new edition for twenty-first century youth, trusting that it will continue to be used by the Holy Spirit to form faith for a new generation.

Rev. Leonard J. Vander Zee  
Theological Editor, Faith Alive Christian Resources

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# UNIT 1

**OUR AWESOME GOD**



# WEEK 1

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?



## DAY 1

# GOD IS MYSTERIOUS

## SCRIPTURE

(Jacob) dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. . . . I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. . . .” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

—Selections from Genesis 28:12-17

## TEACHINGS

We all believe in our hearts  
and confess with our mouths  
that there is a single  
and simple  
spiritual being,  
whom we call God—eternal,  
incomprehensible,  
invisible,  
unchangeable,  
infinite,  
almighty;  
completely wise,  
just,

and good,  
and the overflowing source  
of all good.

—Belgic Confession, Article 1

The **Belgic Confession** is a very old document of the Reformed church (1561); it consists of 37 articles or statements of Reformed doctrine

**Confessions:** organized, carefully written statements of doctrine approved by the church.

If you’re a fan of horror movies, you probably enjoy that thrill of fear you get when the background music turns ominous and a creaking door heralds the entrance of something too horrible to describe. Aliens, monsters, and ghosts are the stuff of entertainment—as long as they aren’t real.

But what about the *real* presence of an unmistakably powerful spirit? Scary?

Probably people have felt that way about God from near the beginning of time. Early in the Bible we find evidence of such feelings. At a place he calls “Bethel” (which means “house of God”) Jacob senses that someone from beyond has mysteriously visited him. He feels haunted and afraid. The one who has visited Jacob is so strange, so alien, that Jacob probably feels like

fleeing. He feels awe. And the place where he feels it, therefore, seems awesome or awe-ful.

It's hard for us to get this feeling about God. We say God's name so often and worship God so regularly and hear so much about God that he doesn't seem very awesome. God seems almost like an unseen great-uncle in another country. We get the feeling of awesomeness about God only at certain times and in certain places. If we are alone at night and hear the wind come mysteriously through the trees, we may think of God. If we attend the funeral of someone we love, we may feel the strangeness of death and the mystery of God. Or suppose we step into a large Eastern Orthodox church. We see statues and smell candles. We sense an atmosphere that is strange and awesome to us. We may feel surrounded by the secret things of God.

Multiply this a thousand times in thinking of the mystery of God. Even when we love God and trust that God loves us, we still can't see God or know everything about him. Even when we can't imagine the world without God, we are often puzzled by his ways with the world.

Still, God has made himself partly known to us. By speaking and acting, God has let us know something of who he is and what he wants. Thus we know that God is good and great and triune. We know that God wants our obedience and trust.

When we say that God is good or great or triune, we are listing some of God's *attributes*. Attributes are things true of someone. When we know some of God's attributes, we can praise and even

imitate God. We can partly understand and try to describe God.

**Attributes of God:** God's characteristics or qualities, such as goodness and greatness. God's attributes help us understand, praise, and imitate God.

I say "try to describe" because God is in some ways indescribable. To say that God is good, for instance, is a little like saying that the Atlantic Ocean is a long swim.

To tell the truth, we will never understand some things about God. God is great beyond all our imagining and holy beyond all our power to think of him. God is terribly and awesomely real. God is indescribably good and great. God is triune.

In all these ways and more God is a mystery.

## FOR REFLECTION

When have you been particularly aware of God's awe-fullness? What do you think prompted that experience?

## PRAYER STARTERS

Tell God the things that make you stand in awe of him. Invite him to teach you more about who he is. Or pray along with a hymn or song about God's awesomeness.

## DAY 2

# GOD IS GOOD

## SCRIPTURE

The LORD is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has  
made.

The LORD is just in all his ways,  
and kind in all his doings . . .  
My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever  
and ever.

—Psalm 145:9, 17, 21

## TEACHINGS

Our world, fallen into sin,  
has lost its first goodness,  
but God has not abandoned the work of his hands:  
our Maker preserves this world,  
sending seasons, sun, and rain,  
upholding all creatures,  
renewing the earth,  
promising a Savior,  
guiding all things to their purpose.

—*Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*,  
paragraph 4

**Attributes of God:** God’s characteristics or qualities,  
such as goodness and greatness. God’s attributes help  
us understand, praise, and imitate God.

*Our World Belongs to God*, published in 1986 and  
revised in 2008, provides an updated look at how the  
Reformed faith addresses concerns facing people today.

“**G**ood” is a word so common we use it without  
thinking. “How ya doing?” the cashier at  
the coffee shop asks. “Pretty good,” you reply.  
A friend posts some of your favorite lyrics on  
Facebook. “Good song!” you comment. At work  
you do more than is expected of you. “Thanks,”  
says your boss. “Good job.”

A common word—*good*. But there are times  
when you really mean it. You’ve been out all day  
hiking, or working, or cross-country skiing. Every  
muscle aches with pleasant tiredness. Every  
bone has gone off duty. At night you climb slowly  
into your bed, squirm deliciously till it nests and  
cradles you perfectly. You whisper your prayer to  
God and then let everything in the world fall away  
into drowsy nothingness. A bed on a tired night  
can feel so good.

Or suppose you’ve been playing tennis or  
basketball. It’s an outdoor court, and you forgot  
your water bottle. So you wait for a drink until you  
get home. Water is a common gift for most of us.  
But when you are really thirsty, when not just your  
tongue and lips and throat but your whole body  
craves liquid, then even water can be incredibly  
good. It’s an overflowing fountain of good.

One more example: you settle into the sofa with a book. Sometimes you don't feel like reading, but this time you've found a book you can't close. You begin to care deeply about the characters. The places and adventures in the book make you feel new things. The whole story moves you outside of yourself in some wonderful way. A good book can be incredibly satisfying.

Goodness is what satisfies us, feeds us, fills us to the brim. That is the way we have been created by God. We have a built-in desire for beds, thirst-quenching liquids, good books, good food, even good people. What's good is whatever God created us to want.

Did you ever notice that the psalms speak of God himself as what we want? Psalm 42 compares God to water. A deer "longs for flowing streams." The deer wants water as a drink, as a bath, possibly as an escape from hunters. God, says the psalmist, is like a stream. God is like water that quenches, cools, and removes us from danger. *We thirst for God.*

**God's goodness:** an attribute of God; it means that God satisfies the needs of all his creatures.

Another psalm (63) compares God to food. God is like a feast for some starving, hunger-crazed person. The person wants as much of God as he or she can get because God is good. *We hunger for God. We long for God because we belong to him.*

Do these sound like strange ideas? Perhaps they are. Perhaps that's because we do not hunger and thirst for God enough. But something we do in church shows our desire for God—and also

shows God's way of meeting it. At the Lord's Supper believers take a piece of bread in hand and lift a cup to their lips. They say, "This is the body of Christ. This is the blood of Christ." Then they eat and drink. There is no doubt they are eating bread and drinking wine or juice. Still, in some mysterious way believers are also consuming as much of God as they can get. They are satisfying their hunger and thirst for God—because God is so good.

Psalm 145 speaks of God's goodness. The Lord is kind to the poor, just in opposing the wicked. God has open ears for our prayers and open hands to hold out to us good things. The Lord "satisfies the desire of every living thing." The Lord, in other words, is good.

But, once more, the point of saying this is not just to admire or appreciate. The point is to worship and give thanks. For whatever goods we have—beds, drink, food, good people, even God himself—are a sheer gift. A never-ending gift. God is an overflowing fountain of good.

That is why we want him.

## FOR REFLECTION

Read Psalm 145, paying special attention to the specific examples of God's goodness.

## PRAYER STARTERS

Thank God for specific needs he has met for you—as many as you can think of. Talk to God about an area of unmet need (in your life or someone else's) where you want to see his goodness.



## DAY 3

# GOD IS GREAT

## SCRIPTURE

Praise the LORD!  
How good it is to sing praises to our God;  
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is  
fitting. . . .

He determines the number of the stars;  
he gives to all of them their names.  
Great is our LORD, and abundant in power;  
his understanding is beyond measure.  
The LORD lifts up the downtrodden;  
he casts the wicked to the ground.

—Psalm 147:1, 4-6

## TEACHINGS

I trust him so much that I do not doubt  
he will provide  
whatever I need  
for body and soul,  
and he will turn to my good  
whatever adversity he sends me  
in this sad world.

He is able to do this because he is almighty God;  
he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

—Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 26

The **Heidelberg Catechism** is a popular confession of the church, used primarily to teach doctrine. This 16th-century confession includes 129 questions and answers about the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer.

I once saw a picture of a very large firefighter bending over a very small girl. The girl had been in a house fire and had breathed in a lot of smoke. By the time she was carried out she wasn't breathing at all. So the firefighter knelt at her side, pinched her nostrils shut with his thumb and first finger, placed his mouth over hers, and breathed into her lungs the breath of life.

Sometimes we think of kneeling, stooping, and crawling as signs of weakness. A slave kneels before a master. Someone who is being humiliated in a book or movie crawls in front of his tormentor.

But kneeling or stooping can also show strength, the strength of goodness. The small girl I mentioned above received mouth-to-mouth resuscitation from a strong man. In the same way a person who cares for a tiny pet or who rescues someone younger and smaller or who cares for someone old or sick is showing strength.

Worldly people often get this mixed up. They think of kindness as a weakness. Sometimes they sneer at goodness. But anybody who has ever been picked up by powerful arms or who has struggled to nurse a sick or dying person—anybody like that knows that kindness, goodness, and compassion are great strengths.

One of the odd and striking things about God is that his goodness so often shows itself in

kneeling, stooping, and bending. Of course, God is great without doing these things. The Bible keeps telling us, for example, of God's powerful deeds in nature. God cracks open great mountains; he shakes the whole earth till it rumbles and splits. He stretches out the heavens and tramples on the waves of the sea (Job 9:8). God possesses unimaginable strength, intelligence, resourcefulness, and power. God is incredibly vast, majestically strong, galactically great. That is part of the reason people fear God.

But our psalm for today tells us that God's greatness includes his stooping, his bending toward us. "Great is our LORD, and abundant in power" (v. 5). Then, in the very next verse, the psalmist writes, "The LORD lifts up the downtrodden."

**God's greatness:** an attribute of God; it means that God is awesome. God's greatness encompasses both power and compassion.

Some of God's children are downtrodden. People tread on them. Careless people walk all over them. The downtrodden eagerly look for friends, but others tell them to get lost. They need food, but others grab even the little they have. Lacking proper homes and education and support systems, these people always seem to have someone's foot in their face. They are like human cigarette butts. Other people like to crush or squash them.

God lifts up the downtrodden. It is part of God's *greatness* to do this. God lifts squashed people to their feet, throwing off the wicked who have been walking all over them. God's greatness is the muscle behind his goodness.

God's greatness is awesome. People fear it. But it is also kind. God bends over to feed young ravens, young children, young adults. Because God is high, he can lift up and straighten out crushed people.

For all God's downtrodden people, one day in the city of David a Savior is born. A baby is born in a cow shed. God stoops over to place a tiny child in the world.

All of heaven's greatness lies there wailing in the straw. What must we think of that?

## FOR REFLECTION

Read Psalm 147. Notice the different ways God displays greatness.

## PRAYER STARTERS

Think of human examples of compassionate strength. Let those examples help you praise God for his greatness. (For example, "God, I remember how my dog fought when I held her down for her shots at the vet. Sometimes I think I'm like that with you. But you don't give up; you know what's best for me even when I don't like it.") Or sing to God a song that praises God's greatness—his power and compassion. Here are a few to start you off: "How Great Thou Art," "Mighty to Save," and "How Great Is Our God."

## DAY 4

# GOD IS TRIUNE

## SCRIPTURE

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

—John 17:20-21

## TEACHINGS

Q. Since there is but one God, why do you speak of three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

A. Because that is how God has revealed himself in his Word: these three distinct persons are one, true, eternal God.

—Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 25

People often compare things. Some jokes and riddles, for example, depend on comparisons. Suppose someone asks, “When is a frog like a baseball player?” (When it catches flies.) For the joke to work, a frog and a baseball player have to be alike in some way. They have to be comparable.

In the fine work of great writers, comparisons help make stories interesting to read. In John Steinbeck’s story *The Red Pony*, a boy named

Jody receives a colt as a gift. Steinbeck tells us that the new pony’s coat was “rough and thick as an Airedale’s fur.” Later, Jody brushes and curries his pony so that “his coat lay as smooth and gleaming as orange-red lacquer.” Finally, Jody wants to train the red pony never to fall on top of him. Why? “He had seen that happen to men before, had seen how they writhed on the ground like squashed bugs, and he was afraid of it.” In the author’s mind dog’s fur, paint, and bugs are interesting comparisons for horsehair and people.

The Bible is full of comparisons. God is compared to a rock. Jesus is compared to a shepherd. You and I, who are members of the church, are compared to the limbs of a human body.

One of the most mysterious things about God is that God is both one and three. There are three persons in God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But there is still only one God. When Christians say this, they are stating the doctrine of the Trinity. They are saying that God is triune.

**Doctrine:** the church’s teachings, based on the Bible, about God and our salvation.

But what would that be like? What is a good comparison for the triune God?

People have thought about this for centuries. Some have suggested that God is like water. After all, water has three forms—solid, liquid, and vapor—but is still only one substance. Maybe God is like that.

Others have said that God is like a man who has three roles to play. God is like an actor. The President of the U.S., for instance, has to play the role of president. But he may also have to play the role of husband (to his wife) and father (to his children). He is therefore one man with at least three roles. Is God like that?

No. In fact, neither of these comparisons is a very good one. In the first comparison, the three forms of water are actually not very much like persons. None of them can think or love, for example. And in the second comparison, the president, even with three roles to play, is still only one person. God, on the other hand, is three persons.

Perhaps we can find a better comparison. Think of three persons in a family. They are very much alike. Marriage, birth, or adoption tie them together. The family members may look like each other. Further, they know each other deeply and love each other. They share memories, experiences, hopes, and plans. If anyone or anything (such as a mugger or a tornado) threatens them, they turn to face this threat together. They are three persons, but one family unit.

**Triune:** being at once a triple and a unit. To say that God is triune is to say that God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) but only one God. That is, God is a **Trinity**.

In a way, God is like that. God is like an extraordinarily close family. The three persons in God are only one divine family or Trinity.

But the Bible gives us the best comparison. In today's passage the Father and Son together are compared to the church. (In other places the Spirit is included.) Does this seem like an odd comparison? The church, after all, contains so many sorts of persons. And some don't seem very much like God.

Still, this is the Bible's comparison. God is three persons, but there is only one God. The church is many persons, but there is only one church. That is, across the world and across the centuries there is only one group of persons who call Jesus their Lord.

God is like the church. Or, better, the church is like God. Do you think the church ought to be even more like God than it is?

## FOR REFLECTION

How is comparing the Trinity to a family or the church helpful to you? What is still mysterious?

## PRAYER STARTER

For decades John Stott, an influential Christian writer and preacher, started each day with a trinitarian prayer. Look his prayer up online and consider using it as your own.



# DEEP DOWN FAITH

*Deep Down Faith* is a 24-week devotional that challenges you to break through surface-level belief and explore your faith more deeply. If you accept this challenge, you can expect to

- learn what the Reformed faith is all about, and how it's rooted in Scripture.
- get a clearer picture of what you believe, and why.
- find out how what you believe impacts your daily life.
- develop a language of faith to help you share your story with others.

You can use this book on your own, or with a mentor or small group. An electronic leader's guide is available from Faith Alive.

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. is the author of five books on Reformed faith, including *Engaging God's World*, *Reformed Deeper*, and *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*. He's known for his ability to communicate complex truths of the Christian faith in everyday language. He has served as president of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, dean of the chapel at Calvin College, a faculty member at several colleges and seminaries, and a pastor.

  
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