



JON NIELSON

KNOWING GOD'S TRUTH

AN INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

“This compendium of systematic theology has all the hallmarks of Jon Nielson’s dynamic pastoral ministry: biblical fidelity, theological clarity, and a passion for the practical application of Christian doctrine. Ideal for classrooms and study groups, as well as for personal use, *Knowing God’s Truth* includes frequent prompts for spiritual practices that will help readers know, love, and celebrate evangelical theology.”

Philip Graham Ryken, President, Wheaton College

“There’s a good reason why theology seems off-putting to many. Although it’s the study of God, sometimes it’s presented in a dry and dreary way. But in this book, Jon Nielson treats theology as a prayerful, joyful, sometimes challenging but always stimulating encounter with the self-revealing triune God. *Knowing God’s Truth* not only informs but transforms.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“In *Knowing God’s Truth*, Jon Nielson calls followers of Jesus to stop settling for lackluster, hand-me-down theological opinions. He calls us instead to dive deep into Scripture and to cultivate theological convictions by wrestling with God’s truth. Each chapter guides readers to search the Bible for themselves and systematically apply biblical truths to real life. Our local congregations would benefit immensely from digesting this resource together.”

Mary Willson Hannah, Director of Women in Ministry, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

“Jon Nielson has given us a gift—a clear, well-organized, and practical introduction to systematic theology. Through careful exposition, guided prayer, and practical application, *Knowing God’s Truth* not only provides the content of each of the major headings of systematic theology, but also leads the reader to deepen his or her fellowship with, and worship of, the God in whom we believe. I praise God for this helpful resource!”

Brian Cosby, Senior Minister, Wayside Presbyterian Church, Signal Mountain, Tennessee; Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

“With each page I turn, I find this book landing on another valuable point of doctrine. Jon Nielson says exactly what he needs to say—briefly, clearly, expertly, soundly—and then bounces on to the next equally helpful teaching. Young believers will eat this up and get a hearty meal. Youth leaders should keep a box of copies of this book nearby and hand them out to every student they know. This book is *that* readable, *that* theologically sturdy, and *that* dialed in to the truths our kids need to feed on.”

Jack Klumpenhower, author, *Show Them Jesus: Teaching the Gospel to Kids*

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An Introduction to Systematic Theology

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*To my wife, Jeanne.
Jeanne—may we help our daughters know
God's truth for their eternal joy in Christ!*

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INTRODUCTION

This book is designed to help you think more deeply about the most important topic—the most important person—in the entire universe: God himself. There is no more important pursuit, no higher calling on your life, no greater purpose, than to know God your Creator rightly, be in a right relationship with him for eternity, and worship him the way you should. These aren't overstatements.

Given this reality, it's always been amazing to me that so many people who call themselves Christians think about *theology* as almost a dirty word! Or, if not that, they at least think about theology as *boring*. “That's something that scholars do,” they sometimes think. “Theology is not for ordinary Christians like us.” But is it?

In this book, you are going to get a simple, straightforward, and hopefully clear introduction to the Christian discipline of *systematic theology*. Because that term can sound intimidating, I've given the book a simpler title: *Knowing God's Truth*. That is, after all, what systematic theology actually *is*. It's talking about, thinking about, and considering God. It's trying to put together, in an organized way (always informed by the Bible), the truths about who God is, who we are, how God has

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created us and saved us, what God wants from us now, and what is ahead for us as God's people in eternity to come. The "systematic" part of systematic theology just means that we try to do this in an organized way; we go through topics one by one—*systematically*. What I really hope you'll see along the way is that this kind of theological thinking is *not* just for the scholars and the experts; it's for all Christians who want to better understand the God they love and serve—the God who has saved them through the work of his Son.

The other really important thing you should get as you read this book is this: systematic theology is not an exercise only for your brain; it's for your heart and your life. We are going to get into some difficult, mysterious, and complex truths about God in this book. But it's all meant to make a difference in the way you think, act, speak, and live for your gracious God. In other words, theology isn't just a mental exercise; it's practical. It's supposed to be *applied* in real life as you live for Jesus.

One of the ways I'll try to remind you of this is by encouraging you to take regular "breaks" in each chapter to "Pray!" This is a simple way for us to remember that we want to make sure we're actually talking *to* the God we're talking *about*. But theology is also supposed to be *personal* and *worshipful*. You should be praying to the God you're learning about even as you are coming to understand him more and more. Some theologians have explained that *theology* (talk about God) is always supposed to lead us to *doxology* (praising God). I really hope this is the case for you as you learn about God in this book and stop to talk to him often along the way.

Finally, a quick word about the organization of the chapters. Here's what you should be ready for:

- For each particular topic (or specific doctrine), you'll have a full chapter's worth of material.
- Each chapter is divided into about ten sections, each of which usually begins with a reading from the Bible. *Please* don't skip

those Bible readings. They are meant to be the foundation for the truths that we're discussing.

- As I've already mentioned, there will be frequent "breaks" in each chapter to "Pray!" I encourage you to take those breaks, pausing to talk to God for just thirty to sixty seconds as you're learning about him.
- Each chapter will have suggested verses for you to memorize—verses that are linked to that chapter's topic. Whether or not you memorize those verses is up to you, but this would be a great way to intentionally hide God's word in your heart as you learn more about him.
- At the end of many of the chapters in this book, we will have at least a brief discussion of the application of the doctrine that we are studying. We need to think through why a given subject matters to us—how it makes a difference in our lives as followers of God. At the end of each chapter, I'll pull together some key truths and themes for you to review. That's a tool for you to look back and remember some of the main points on a particular area of doctrine.

I hope you're ready to get started with "knowing God's truth." And I hope that what you learn in this book will give you a deeper love for your God—as you talk to him along the way and seek to live for this glorious and gracious one who has saved you through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 1

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

What comes to mind when you hear the word *theology*? Is it a picture of men with long beards in robes discussing biblical issues with somber faces? Is it an image of a pastor giving a long sermon filled with words that you do not understand?

In this book, we are going to begin to study theology. In this first chapter, our goal is simply to define this term and discuss how it relates to you right now. Then we'll take a brief look at the categories of theology that we will explore in the chapters ahead.

As you read this book, *you* are going to be learning and doing theology! This may excite you, frighten you, intimidate you, or even bore you. Yet this is precisely what you will be tackling in the chapters to come. We are going to learn theology together.

So what is the meaning of this word that we have been repeating over and over in the beginning of this chapter? *Theology* literally means “God talk.” The root *theo* means “God,” and the suffix, *-logy*, comes from the Greek word *logos*, which means “word.” So when we do theology, we are talking together about God and things that relate to God. Theology, broadly, is the study of God. When you think about it this way, hopefully the term will seem less intimidating or alienating. After all,

we already do this when we study God's word; we study God. All we will be doing now is a slightly different kind of theology (we will learn about the different kinds a bit later).

You need to understand an important point at the very beginning of this book on theology: *you* are a theologian. That is, if you have ever thought about God, made a statement about God, or explained something about God to someone else, you have done theology. Every person, really, is a theologian, provided that he or she has formed some opinion about God—who he is, what he does, and how we know about him. So theology is not only a discipline for seminary students and brilliant scholars; it is a practice that you should be actively engaged in as you seek to learn more about the God who created you.

In the coming chapters, we will seek to ground our theological work in the Bible—the source of God's revelation of himself. Christians believe that the Bible is the source of ultimate truth; it is the inspired word of God, and it is the best place to learn about him. Because of this, you will see, in our next chapter, that the first category of theology that we will discuss is the doctrine of Scripture. If we do not begin there, we will have no foundation from which to grow into a knowledge of God's truth.

You are going to learn much more about God in these chapters; hopefully that is exciting to you! Right now, you should begin to think of yourself as a young theologian—someone who is fully capable of reading and studying God's word and beginning to formulate beliefs about who he is, what he does, and how human beings are to relate to him.

Remember!

Your suggested memory verses for this first chapter come from the book of Exodus, when God revealed himself to Moses in

a powerful way. God, in other words, gave Moses a theology of himself; he taught him about his character and his ways. As you pause to read these verses carefully, think about what God is saying about himself. Begin to form theology as you read.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Ex. 34:6–7)

PRAY!

As you begin this introduction to theology, ask God to help you grasp what theology is—its meaning, value, and importance for your life even now. No matter your age, you can begin to practice theology as you learn more about the God who created you and saved you through his Son. Ask God to teach you about himself!

WHY DOES THEOLOGY MATTER?

Now we need to ask a very simple but incredibly important question: “Why does theology matter?” You see, it is one thing to define *theology*, and it is quite another to become convinced that this discipline actually has value for our everyday lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Does theology really matter? Does it make a difference in the way we live and think?

Probably the biggest critique of the discipline of theology, even by Christians, is that it is not *practical*. It is not surprising that people who do not know Jesus do not want to study theology. What is often

quite disappointing is that many Christians look at theology as something that is not useful—something that does not really matter in everyday life. Perhaps you have not heard this yet, but you will! There is a very real sentiment from some Christians that careful theological thought and study is a waste of time; Christians, these people think, should be out helping people, preaching the gospel, and engaging in active obedience rather than learning about God and the Bible.

So why is theology important? Why give many chapters to its study? Here are just a few reasons:

Theology is about God. The most basic reason why theology is important is that it is about God; it is the study of our Creator, Savior, and King. In a very real sense, then, the study of theology is the best and most important study that we can ever engage in. It is not a waste of time to learn more about the God of the universe. It is, in fact, probably the most valuable thing we could be giving our time to do. The study of theology, of course, should not prevent us from helping people, sharing the gospel, and actively obeying Jesus; it should actually help us do these activities with even more knowledge of and love for God—and for human beings created by this God.

Theology affects the way we live. Many people do not realize that every decision we make is ultimately a theological decision. Everything we do is a reflection of our beliefs—especially our beliefs about God. What we say, how we think, the way we use our time—all of these ultimately reflect what we truly believe to be true about the universe and the meaning of life. In this sense, then, our theology really does affect the way we live. What we believe about God has an impact on the choices we make—even the small ones—every single day.

Theology helps us make sense of our world. Finally, a theological view of the world that is informed by the Bible helps us make sense of the

world around us. God, in his word, reveals to us the deepest realities about our world: his role in creation, the sinfulness of humanity, his sovereign purpose and plan, and the salvation that is available only through Christ Jesus, his Son. Careful theological work, then, matters because it is a way for us to understand and make sense of the world. Theology is important because we come to see our purpose as we understand God's role in the world by listening to his word.

Hopefully you are beginning to understand the value of studying theology—speaking words about God that are informed by his word. Your thoughts about God are the most important thoughts that you have; they affect the way you live!



PRAY!

As you think about the importance of theology, ask God to make you more aware of how your beliefs about him actually make a difference in your everyday life. Pray that he would help you to take his word and his truth even more seriously as you see what an effect theology has on choices, thoughts, hopes, and actions.

BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

You have been learning about theology broadly as the study of God (or “God talk,” to take the word very literally). I have urged you to begin understanding yourself as a theologian, so long as you are willing to begin learning about God, talking about God, and forming beliefs about God on the basis of his word. Hopefully this is exciting for you!

Next, we are going to consider the three major “subsets” of theology that are studied today and see which of these we will be engaging in over the coming chapters. Then, for the rest of this chapter, we will introduce the various “headings” of theology that we will be studying.

The three subsets of theology are:

Biblical theology. When we talk about biblical theology, we are referring to a label that has existed for only 150 years or so. Yet in another sense, this kind of theology dates back to the first work and sermons done by the apostles as they preached and explained the Old Testament, showing how it relates to the saving work of God through Jesus Christ. So biblical theology is theological study that follows the path of the Bible. It is the careful discipline of taking a theme or truth about God and tracing its development through the entire storyline of the Bible, seeing how it begins, grows in significance, and is ultimately fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Biblical theology assumes, as we have been assuming in this book, that the Bible really is one big story of God's saving work in the world. It is God's inspired word, and therefore it "holds together" in a way that makes it legitimate and right for us to study its themes in this way.

Historical theology. Historical theology obviously involves history. It is related to systematic theology in that it is organized more around themes and less around tracing the Bible's development of those themes from Genesis to Revelation. But historical theology seeks to take into account the development of theological beliefs throughout history. So it involves studying the great theologians and thinkers of the past in order to see how, for example, the doctrine of grace or the doctrine of the Trinity has developed in people's opinions and articulations over time.

Systematic theology. This is the theological discipline that we will be engaging in over the coming chapters. Systematic theology has to do with just what it sounds like: theological study that is systematized or organized carefully around big themes of biblical truth. So, for example, we will study the doctrine of God as it is revealed in Scripture. We will focus on the doctrine of salvation and consider what the Bible teaches about this important subject. The goal of this discipline is not, like

biblical theology, to constantly trace the development of the story of the Bible from beginning to end. It is to organize—systematize—our Christian beliefs around categories and themes. This should certainly not be done without any thought to biblical theology. Yet systematic theology is a valuable way to organize and carefully think through Christian core beliefs.



PRAY!

Think about the different disciplines of theology that you have learned about. As you prepare to engage in systematic theology in the coming chapters, ask God to help you make this an exercise that is truly full of worship for him! Pray that this pursuit would not just be about acquiring “head knowledge,” but that you would truly grow to love God more through all of this learning.

CATEGORIES OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

You now know a basic definition of theology. You have learned a bit about the importance of the study of theology. Also, you now know that the kind of theology we will be engaging in through the coming chapters is called systematic theology. Hopefully you now feel a bit more “situated” and ready to dive into theological study, conversation, and thought in the chapters to come.

The rest of this chapter will introduce you to the general categories of systematic theology that we will be using as we learn together. These categories are not the only ones there are—or ones on an official systematic theology list somewhere. They are, though, fairly basic categories that many theologians use as they organize their theological study. We will spend one chapter on each of these categories in this book. The goal is to help you become acquainted with these basic systematic theological categories, as well as with the questions that we will seek to answer in our study of each of them.

Scripture and God

The initial two categories of systematic theology that we will cover in the coming chapters are Scripture and God.

Scripture. We will begin our systematic theology study with the category of Scripture. We will do this not because the Bible somehow comes before God; God is obviously the eternal one, who has existed from eternity past—long before the Bible was ever inspired and written! We will begin with the doctrine of Scripture because it is so foundational to everything else that we will learn and discuss—especially truths about God himself. If we do not ground our study of systematic theology in the Bible, we will get off to a very shaky start. The Bible is God’s revelation of himself, and it is therefore the very foundation of our study of theology.

We will try to answer these questions:

- What *is* the Bible really?
- What do we mean by “inspiration”?
- What role did God have in the writing of the Bible?
- What role did human beings have in the writing of the Bible?
- How should the Bible function in the lives of Christians today?
- What can the Bible really accomplish in the lives of believers?
- How do we know that the Bible is true and accurate?

God. In one sense, of course, the entire study of theology is the study of God. But the study of God himself is its own special category in systematic theology—known as “theology proper”—and this will be the second doctrine we will cover in our systematic theological study. Our goal is to carefully learn and express much of the basic truth that the Bible gives us about the God who is both Creator and Savior of the world.

We will seek to answer the following questions:

- What are God’s attributes?
- What is God’s character like?

- What does it mean to say that God is sovereign?
- How can we understand the Trinity?
- What role does God play in the world today?
- What *is* God?
- What does it mean to say that God is infinite and eternal?

This will be an exciting and challenging chapter because we will be learning about a being who is, ultimately, beyond our ability to fully comprehend!



PRAY!

Pray that God would teach you much more about his word and his character when you dive into the chapters about Scripture and God. Talk to him about questions that you still have about these topics; pray honestly, as God already knows your heart and your struggles! Ask him to continue leading you to his truth as you seek to be led by his word, the Bible.

Man and Sin

The next two categories of systematic theology that we will learn about are man and sin. The more technical names for these systematic categories are *anthropology* (the study of man) and *hamartiology* (the study of sin). What will we cover in these categories, and what questions will we seek to answer?

Man. Obviously there is a broad academic discipline known as anthropology, which refers to a much wider study than we will be doing in this chapter! The kind of anthropology that we will be doing focuses explicitly and specifically on what we learn about human beings from the Bible. We will seek to gather all of the truth that the Bible gives us about human beings and use it to paint a careful and clear picture

of who we are, why we are that way, and what this all means for our eternal purpose in the universe.

Some of the basic questions that will guide our conversation and study in the chapter on the study of man include:

- What are human beings, and how are they unique from the rest of the created order?
- What does it mean to be created in God's image?
- What does it mean to be created male and female?
- What are some implications of our creatureliness for the way we understand our purpose as human beings?
- How does eternity factor into our consideration of human beings' purpose and goals?

Sin. Obviously the topic of sin is all over the Bible; yet there are many different opinions and teachings about the reality of sin, its role and effect in the world, and God's interaction with it. We will seek to understand the doctrine of sin as biblically as possible. Hopefully this chapter also will help us come to a better understanding of the great salvation that God offers us in Jesus Christ.

In the chapter on sin, we will seek to answer the following basic questions:

- How did sin enter the world?
- What is God's relationship to sin if he is sovereign and completely in control?
- What is "total depravity," and what does that mean for the every-day experience of human beings?
- What are some of the implications of living in a sinful and fallen world?
- Is it possible for someone to live without sin?
- How does the holy and just God view sin?
- How does understanding the reality of sin help us see what salvation accomplishes for us?

 **PRAY!**

Ask God to help you learn much more about humanity and about sin in the chapters that focus on these topics. Pray that this time of learning will result in a great appreciation, in your heart, for the salvation that God has accomplished through his Son, Jesus.

Jesus and Salvation

The last two theological topics we considered—man and sin—lead well into the next two: Jesus and salvation. Even though we have already discussed the doctrine of God (theology proper), it is appropriate to devote an entire chapter to the study of Jesus (technical name: Christology) given the centrality and complexity of his work on earth and with God’s people. We will talk more just below about what we will cover in that category of study.

The doctrine of salvation (soteriology) is also important enough to be set on its own as a distinct category. There are big questions to be addressed here, and the Bible has much to say about the method and meaning of salvation through the work of Jesus Christ.

The chapters on Jesus and salvation will be exciting ones, as they center on the substance, meaning, and understanding of the core elements of the Christian gospel. These chapters will give us opportunity to dig into the essence, meaning, and method of our salvation. Let’s look at these categories and the questions we will seek to answer as we study them.

Jesus. The study of the person and work of Jesus could consume this entire book—and even more than that! It is impossible to get to the bottom of the mysteries of the God who became human, died for the sins of his people, rose from the dead, and now reigns supreme as the eternal King who will return to judge all the earth. Still, we will seek to answer the following big questions about Jesus:

CHAPTER 1

- Who is Jesus, and how does he interact with the other persons within the Trinity?
- How did Jesus function before his incarnation?
- What is the incarnation, and how does it work?
- What does the incarnation of Jesus mean for us?
- How must we understand the life of Jesus on earth?
- How does Jesus exist now and what is he doing now?
- What will Jesus do and be, eternally, in relation to God's people?

As you can see, this will be a big chapter. There is a lot to cover.

Salvation. The study of salvation in this chapter will take us to the very heart of the Christian faith and of the core of the gospel. We are going to consider, quite simply, what the Bible says about how God accomplishes salvation for sinful people through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. We will examine what was achieved through Jesus's death and resurrection in order to gain a full and biblical picture of salvation to the best of our ability. We will seek to answer the following questions:

- What actually was accomplished through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross?
- How does Jesus's identity as both God and man factor into our understanding of salvation?
- What happens to our sin; how does God deal finally with rebellion and disobedience?
- What is the basic "order" of salvation?
- What is God's role in salvation, and what is the human role?
- How should we understand our experience of salvation now and our "final" experience of salvation in heaven?

There are, again, some big questions to answer here! We will need to ask for God's help for diligent work in his word and humble acceptance of his truth.

 **PRAY!**

As you look forward to studying the categories of Jesus and salvation, ask God to prepare you for learning, growth, and humility as you study. Pray that he would protect you from feeling that you “know it all” already; ask him to make you humble and ready to see more and more about the wonderful salvation through his Son that is revealed to us through Scripture.

Heaven and Hell

Look back over the categories of systematic theology that we have already summarized and considered. Take a few moments to think about the questions and points of interest that you have with regard to each one:

- Scripture—What questions are especially interesting to you about this category?
- God—What more would you like to learn about the person of God?
- Man—What aspects of humanity would you like to discover more about?
- Sin—Why is it so important for Christians to have an accurate, biblical, and robust understanding of the doctrine of sin?
- Jesus—How could you grow in your understanding of the person and work of Christ?
- Salvation—What questions do you still have about the way your salvation “works”?

Now let’s turn our focus toward another theological category that we will cover in this book. We’ll spend a chapter on the doctrine of heaven and hell, seeking to discover what the Bible teaches about these important realities. It will be important for us—especially in this chapter—to be extremely committed to holding fast to what the Bible *does*

and *does not* say about these topics. There is surely much confusion and false teaching about these categories in the church today! Let's take a brief look at what we hope to learn together.

Interestingly, while many people see Jesus as one who came with a message of good news, grace, and salvation (which, of course, is true), Jesus himself spoke often about the reality of hell. Heaven, too, is described in Scripture as a real place; the book of Revelation especially will inform our doctrine of heaven and hell. The chapter that covers these categories concerns eternal realities that are very clearly taught in the Bible. Our goal is to answer at least some of these big questions:

- What does the Bible teach about heaven?
- What does the Bible teach about what happens to human beings who die before the return and judgment of Jesus Christ?
- What does the Bible teach about the final resurrection?
- What does the Bible teach about the new heaven and new earth?
- What is hell? What will it consist of?
- How is God just in sending people to hell?
- What must Christians believe about heaven and hell, and what does the Bible remain unclear about?

These are big questions. As you can see, we will need God's help to search his word carefully for the answers that he has—and has not—provided for us there.



PRAY!

Talk to God about your study of the fascinating topics of heaven and hell. Pray that he would help you make a commitment to say neither more nor less than what his word says about these topics. Ask him to give you a humble willingness to sit under the authority of the Bible and look for its direction to inform your views.

The Church

As you learn about the many different categories of systematic theology that we are going to cover in this book, hopefully you are not getting overwhelmed but excited!

The next category of systematic theology that we will cover is the church (ecclesiology), which will include a discussion of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Communion). Because much debate and disagreement surrounds these subjects, it will be very important for you to make a commitment to carefully read and study God's word as you work through this category.

The doctrine of the church is a very important category for systematic theology because Christians live out their daily lives as followers of Jesus Christ today in the context of local churches around the world. This category, then, is incredibly practical for people, as it relates to their experience of worship, community, fellowship, Bible teaching, and spiritual disciplines week after week. The Bible, thankfully, has much to say about what the church is and how it is meant to function. In fact, much of the content of the Epistles of the New Testament is given to helping believers in Jesus Christ function well as his church. So in this chapter, we will have a lot of biblical material to work with.

As we consider the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper, we'll see that there can be much debate and tension about these sacraments (what they mean and how they are to be performed). For this reason, it will be good for you to dig carefully into Scripture and determine what you believe the Bible actually teaches about them.

In this chapter, then, we will seek to answer the following big questions about the church:

- What is the church, biblically defined?
- What did the church look like during its early years, and how should that determine the way we “do” church today?
- How is the church meant to function in the lives of believers in Jesus Christ?

- Biblically, how is a local church meant to be governed and led?
- What are the marks of a true local church, according to the Bible?
- What is the ultimate theological function of the church?
- What is the difference between the “universal” church and the “local” church?
- What is a “sacrament,” and what makes it a sacrament?
- What are the roles of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in the sacraments?
- Why are sacraments important at all?
- What are some of the different views on the Lord’s Supper, and how have they emerged from biblical teaching?
- What are some of the different views on baptism, and how have they emerged from biblical teaching?
- What actually happens during the celebration of a sacrament?

There are some big questions here, as you can see!



PRAY!

Ask God again to give you a spirit of humility as you prepare to dive into systematic theological study through this book. Pray that he would help you learn much more from his word about both the church and the sacraments so that you will have a better understanding of how you, as a follower of Jesus, are called to worship God along with other believers.

Angels and Demons

Our next category of systematic theology has made way for many interesting, fanciful, and even downright imaginative teachings.

While the Bible does not teach many of the things about angels and demons that some people think it does, it certainly has much to say about the very real existence and function of a spiritual realm. There are

angels—nonhuman spiritual beings created by God and in his service. There are also demons—nonhuman spiritual beings created by God but in the service of Satan. In this chapter, we will examine the Bible’s teachings about this spiritual realm, which is both very real and often very misunderstood. We will seek to answer the following questions according to Scripture:

- What are angels, and how do they function?
- What is the relationship between angels and humans/the earth?
- What are demons, and how do they function?
- Who is Satan, and what is his role today?
- How have angelic beings tended to contribute to God’s plans in the world in the past? How do they do so today?
- What will be the role and purpose of spiritual beings after the judgment and return of Jesus Christ?
- What is the nature of human interaction with angelic and demonic beings?



PRAY!

Take time to thank God for all his word has to say about the spiritual world. Thank him for his creation of angels and for the work they do in the world. Thank him also that he guards his people from the attacks of demons and their master, Satan. Pray that he will help you gain a biblical understanding of these real but unseen beings.

Last Things

You’ve now been introduced to several different categories of systematic theology. You have seen the way that systematic theology is distinct from biblical theology and historical theology, and hopefully you are excited about diving into study of the various systematic categories as

you read this book! By God's grace, you will know much more about his word and his truth by the end.

Next we'll turn to the doctrine of last things, or the end times (eschatology). Much of this study will be grounded in the biblical book of Revelation. Yet there are pertinent truths and teachings that we can draw from the Gospels and some of the prophets as well.

There is much debate surrounding eschatology, so we need to walk a careful line as we approach this category. Many people have very strong opinions about the timing of certain events and the specific signs that will precede Christ's return. Our goal is to be led by God's word toward careful conclusions about the last things.

Let's look at the general tendencies in the study of eschatology, how we should approach it, and what questions we will seek to answer about this category.

First, many people, in their study of eschatology, fall into one of two "extreme" approaches. Some enter this study with a desire to debate other people; they want to make their case for a very specific interpretation of Revelation and the timing of Jesus's return, the meaning of the millennium, the identity of the antichrist in Revelation, or other key elements. Their focus is entirely on arguing for their specific eschatological position, and as a result, they can almost miss the big point of that debate!

The other extreme, though, can be equally dangerous. This is the attitude that says, "Jesus wins; who cares how it is all going to happen?" While it is true that Jesus will win in the end, the Bible still gives us a *lot* of information, prophecy, and teaching that we need to study and take seriously. While we should not be obsessed with debate and with our own opinions of how the end times will happen, we should study Scripture carefully and try to come to good conclusions. This is exactly what we will seek to do in this chapter on eschatology. We will seek to answer the following questions:

- What does Satan's influence on earth look like in the last days?
- What is the period of "tribulation" that the Bible describes?

- When will Jesus return to judge the world?
- What will happen at the final judgment?
- What does the Bible tell us about the final defeat of Satan and his followers?
- Can we know the identity of the antichrist?
- What can we know about the new heaven and new earth?



PRAY!

Say a prayer of thanks to God for the promises of his word about the last things. Thank him that Jesus will return. Thank him that all things will one day be set right. Praise him that his justice and love will reign forever. Ask him for strength and help to trust him, and also to study his word carefully to understand everything you can about the last things of this world.

The Holy Spirit

The final chapter in this book will focus on the third person of the Trinity: God the Holy Spirit.

While we will cover some aspects of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (technical name: pneumatology) in the chapter on the doctrine of God, it will be good to spend an entire chapter on the Holy Spirit specifically. This is due, in part, to the great confusion and misunderstanding about the Spirit among Christians today. While we will never know God the Holy Spirit exhaustively, this chapter will seek to lay out clearly what the Bible says about him. We'll seek to answer these questions:

- What does the Holy Spirit do today?
- How was the Holy Spirit active in the creation of the world and during the days of the Old Testament?

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- What are some mistakes people make when they think about the role and purposes of God the Holy Spirit?
- How is the Holy Spirit active in our salvation?
- In what ways is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives and hearts today as followers of Jesus Christ?

Our goal is to rightly honor, worship, and serve our great God in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



PRAY!

Spend a few minutes in prayer, thanking God for the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church and in your life. Pray that your study of this category of systematic theology will be fruitful in helping you understand what the word of God teaches about the Spirit and his crucial role in regeneration, sanctification, and worship.

REVIEW

Before you move on to the next chapter, consider spending some time reviewing the lessons and concepts that you have learned in this introductory chapter. Here are some key concepts to remember:

Theology

- Theology literally means “God talk”—it is the study of God.
- If you think thoughts about God and make statements about him, you are thinking and talking theologically.
- Theology is intensely practical because it affects the way we live, think, and make decisions.

Scripture and God

- We will begin with the doctrine of Scripture because, without God’s revelation, we cannot know about God.

- While all of theology is about God, there is also the study of “theology proper,” which seeks to answer questions about God’s character, being, existence, and actions in the world.

Man and Sin

- The study of man is also called anthropology, and it seeks to identify all that the Bible teaches about humanity.
- The study of sin is also called hamartiology, and it seeks to summarize the Bible’s teaching about sin, fallenness, and total depravity.

Jesus and Salvation

- While Jesus is fully God, it is appropriate to have a category of systematic theology fully devoted to his work in the world and in salvation because of his centrality and significance through his incarnation, death, resurrection, and eternal reign.
- Christology is the formal term for the study of Jesus.
- The study of salvation—soteriology—seeks to answer big questions about the way in which human beings are saved by God through Jesus.

Heaven and Hell

- Scripture describes both heaven and hell as real places.
- The Gospels show us that Jesus taught often about hell.

The Church

- The study of the church is also called ecclesiology.
- The study of the sacraments seeks to summarize all that the Bible teaches about baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Angels and Demons

- Both angels and demons are nonhuman spiritual beings created by God.

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- While angels serve God, their Creator, demons are in the service of Satan.

Last Things

- The study of last things is also referred to as eschatology.
- Most people tend toward an obsession with debate about the end times or toward reluctance to engage carefully with the teachings of the Bible on this topic.

The Holy Spirit

- The study of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) focuses on the third person of the Trinity: God the Holy Spirit, who is fully God and a distinct person of the Trinity, and has a unique role and purpose.
- It is important for us to understand the function and purpose of God the Holy Spirit, especially in light of the confusion about these things in the Christian world today.

Remember!

Consider the suggested memory verses for this chapter once more as we conclude this introduction. Think again about the God who reveals himself with these words to Moses. Consider his mercy and his grace—the fact that he is “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Consider his justice and holiness—the fact that he will “by no means clear the guilty.” This is the God who poured out mercy and grace on sinful people by allowing his own Son to be treated as guilty for their sake. This is an amazing God!

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression

and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Ex. 34:6-7)



PRAY!

Take a moment to pray about your ongoing study of all of these systematic theology categories. Ask God to expand your understanding of his character and his word, but also to help you connect this growing knowledge to your heartfelt worship of him.
