

ADAM RAMSEY

TRUTH

on

FIRE

The logo features a stylized grey arc above the text. The text "thegoodbook" is in a lowercase, sans-serif font, and "COMPANY" is in a smaller, uppercase, sans-serif font below it.  
thegoodbook  
COMPANY

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## FOREWORD

*by Ray Ortlund*

What energizes us for truly Christian living is not good intentions but true beliefs. Our good intentions help, but they come and go. Who among us isn't weak and wobbly? But our beliefs—especially our beliefs about God—as they deepen, are what will get more and more traction within us for positive change. That is why asking deep questions about God and pondering wise answers from the Bible is a power far beyond our own weakness! It's how, by God's grace, fallible people like us really do become living proof that he is there, that he is real, and that he is beautiful.

This new book by Adam Ramsey will help us all toward greater clarity in our beliefs about God and the difference God makes. That is why I respect and welcome this book.

The backstory to my gratitude begins in 1974. That was when I heard Dr. Francis Schaeffer speak at The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Switzerland. I've never forgotten what he said to us that day.

Schaeffer asked the question, *What is the Christian's task in the world today?* And his answer was not evangelism. Evangelism really matters. But as a stand-alone effort, our evangelism can seem canned, like a sales pitch. Our task in the world today requires a larger, fuller, more human total reality—Christians who together stand out clearly for what

we believe, and stand out beautifully for how we embody our beliefs. Then something powerful can start happening.

How then can we Christians and our churches become compelling in this generation? Schaeffer proposed two contents and two realities. The two contents are sound doctrine and honest answers to honest questions. The two realities are true spirituality and the beauty of human relationships. When we are saying something worth listening to, and when we are displaying something worth noticing, we become a prophetic presence in the world today.

What we don't need is cool, impressive, slick, proud. What we do need is truth, honesty, reality, beauty. That's what Schaeffer was pleading for. And his counsel has shaped and guided me all these years.

Now along comes Pastor Adam Ramsey, with Liberti Church in Australia, and I rejoice! As an older pastor, I never stop looking for younger pastors who get it. I look and pray for men who understand, who are good at what they do but who see through empty "success"; pastors who long to see what only God can do and who are willing to walk in his truth and his ways. Adam is that kind of pastor. He cares deeply about what we believe about God, and he cares deeply about how our beliefs can put something of God's own glory upon us.

Adam understands how powerful it is when the grandeur of God gets through to us way down deep. As a true vision of God grips our hearts, something wonderful happens. *God himself visits us at that deep level.* When that happens, who needs a canned, mechanical sales talk for Jesus? The living One just becomes visible, and even obvious, in us! He's good at revealing Christ like that. All he's asking of us is that we admit we're not good at showcasing Jesus, so that we stare at him for a change and let our hearts be amazed. Adam's book, *Truth on Fire*, will help us all do that very thing.

Adam, thank you for writing this book. It is an answer to many prayers and longings. Now may God put his hand on this book and on everyone who reads it, with reviving and reforming impact, for his glory and our joy!

**RAY ORTLUND**

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## INTRODUCTION

# Building the Hearth, Lighting the Flame

*“The purpose of theology is doxology—  
we study in order to praise.”*

**J.I. PACKER**

I want the truth that I believe to be on fire in my life.

I'm guessing you do too.

And I'm also guessing there's a chance that this is not where you are as you open up this book. Perhaps you sense a disconnect between your thinking about God and your experience of God? A gap between the life of your mind and the life of your heart?

Maybe you're part of a church that emphasizes solid Bible teaching and the life of the *mind*. You've experienced a number of wonderful Bible-study groups and maybe even discussed systematic theology with friends, but there's a gnawing sense that something is still missing—an incompleteness. The teaching is meaty and solid, so why does your Christianity feel dry? You can articulate biblical answers and you love the truth of them. But it is truth like a treasured photo of a father who lives far away, when what you really long for is one of his hugs. Deep down you wish you could have a greater experience of the God that you have learned so much about. Is it wrong to want more?

Or maybe your background is in churches that emphasize experiencing God and the life of the *heart*. You are present most Sundays and active in a ministry or two, where you really feel a sense of God's presence. But sometimes, you are not sure that you have much biblical scaffolding to support your very real love for Christ. You get the sense that you should know the God you love a bit better, a bit deeper. Is it wrong to want more?

The simple answer to that question is: no. One of the great tragedies of this present generation of Christians has been the divorce between theological and experiential Christianity. On one side, you tend to have churches committed to theological accuracy, knowing the word of God, and holding a high view of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This team is generally known for expository preaching, systematic theology, and dead white guys who've written lots of books. We'll call this team "The Thinkers." On the other side tend to be churches committed to cultivating an experience of God, knowing the Holy Spirit in personal communion, and engaging the emotions through heartfelt corporate worship experiences. This team reveres passion, cultural relevance, and anything that passes the pragmatic test of, "it works." We'll call this team "The Feelers." The Thinkers often view The Feelers as thoughtless, and The Feelers disregard The Thinkers as lifeless. And more often than not, both are completely right.

What if we didn't have to choose between an intelligent faith and a passionate one? After all, a sharp mind with a cold heart is just as big of a fail as a heart radically on fire about nonsense. The life of the mind and the life of the heart shouldn't really need to be reconciled, because they were always meant to be friends. God intends for us to pursue a Christianity that is radically committed to theological clarity in a way that does not diminish the life of the heart but actually intensifies it. That's what this book will help you to do.



**MY STORY: DECONSTRUCTION, RECONSTRUCTION**

I grew up in experience-driven churches, each of which were soaked with laughter and light-heartedness and a sense of “life.” Our services each week were always positive and uplifting. We had prayer meetings late in the night and early in the morning, where the super-devoted among us came together to seek a deeper experience of God. Evangelism was a high priority. Events were well executed. And the emotional impact during corporate worship was often powerful.

But the older I became, the more I began to notice something: the Bible was present but not central. Vital doctrines were actively avoided. At best, the gospel would sometimes make an appearance at the end of a sermon, but it certainly didn’t have any real implications for the daily Christian life. Our emotions were engaged, but our minds were neglected, for fear that we’d be guilty of the great sin of “boredom.” People had a good time on Sundays, but weren’t equipped to navigate suffering or disappointment well, because they had a view of God that didn’t line up with reality. And any time a church has a high view of themselves and a low view of God, it becomes a hotbed for hypocrisy. There was no greater place where I saw this than in the mirror.

I began to wrestle with the Scriptures; especially the parts I had never once heard a sermon about. Words like *sovereignty* and *election*, *propitiation* and *providence* were like signposts in a new country that I was eager to explore. I decided to lay all my cards on the table—everything I thought I knew about God—and push it all through the filter of the Bible to see what would come out the other side. I opened God’s word with new appetite. I read the 4th and 5th-century Church Fathers (like Athanasius and Augustine), the 16th-century Reformers (like Martin Luther and John Calvin), and the 17th and 18th-century Puritans (pretty much any guy who wore black and was named John or Thomas). I even engaged

in an epic battle of counterpoints and arguments with the (21st-century) preacher John Piper through his books and online sermons—which he of course was completely unaware of, but that he still managed to win. And here’s what happened: as my mental image of God increased in magnitude, I discovered that so too did my desire for holiness, my gratitude for grace, my delight in worship, and my boldness in mission.

But something else was also growing during my personal theological reformation. A spiritual weed growing subtly alongside the fruit: pride. An intellectual brashness that delighted in simply being right. Now that I had more of the biblical facts, it became way too easy to settle for having a more accurate understanding of God at the expense of a joy-soaked, moment-by-moment communion with God. Fortunately, my wife along with my pastor both called me out on it while it was still in its infancy. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” said the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 8:1). By God’s grace, I learned the first part of that verse early on in my theological discoveries, even though it would take many more years for the second part to become more evident in my life.

A few years went by, and our family relocated from Australia to Seattle, when I was asked to take on the role of teaching the Bible to young people at a church called Mars Hill. At that point, it was considered one of the fastest-growing churches in the United States, under the teaching ministry of one of the most well-known preachers in the world at that time. The content was biblical and meaty and robust, and thousands were being baptised each year. Yet before the many other problems that were eventually exposed at Mars Hill became obvious—ultimately leading to its collapse—some of the first questions my wife and I were asking about our new theological tribe were: *Why is there such an absence of joy when*

*we gather together in worship? Why do the prayers have no more fervency than a jazz radio-station host pulling the late shift? How come there are so many people who can articulate biblical theology, yet also lament any kind of meaningful intimacy with the God their theology points to?*

### **THEOLOGY ON FIRE**

The first half of my Christian life had engaged my emotions but not my mind. The second half engaged my mind but not my emotions. Having spent time in both of these camps respectively, I had grown tired of the divide. I wanted both. I wanted truth on fire.

And that is exactly what God wants for me, and for you, as well. After all, didn't Jesus say that the most important command in the whole universe was that we cultivate a love for God that includes all our heart *and* all our mind (Mark 12:28-30)?

So why is it that so often we settle for just one or the other? Here's why: we are afraid.

Some of us are afraid of a theologically robust Christianity that engages only our minds, because we've experienced the cold lovelessness from those who prefer arguing over adoring and debating over delighting. We naturally shrink back from those who weaponize theology. Christians who can articulate the doctrines of grace but lack graciousness—who understand the nuances of justification but have lives absent of joy—are, at best, confusing. At worst, they can cause great damage to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Others of us are afraid of an experiential Christianity that engages only the emotions, because we've seen the damage that takes place when spiritual experience is separated from biblical literacy. We're tired of hyped-up, talk-show Christianity that feels about as authentic as a laugh-track on a 90's sitcom. We've seen the impotency of worshipping worship and having

faith in faith. We want the truth, the real thing, the reality of God, as he has revealed himself through his word.

It's time to leave our fears behind by seeing how we can have both—rather than having to choose between—the robust *and* the experiential. If right thinking is the hearth, then right experience is the flame. We need both. Without the hearth, our spiritual experiences can run wild, leaving many burn-victims in their wake. Without the flame, our magnificent theology is cheapened into a nice decoration, sitting pointlessly and lifelessly in the corner of our lives. So we cannot settle for one without the other. The 13th-century preacher Anthony of Padua, who was entrusted with the theological instruction of the followers of Francis of Assisi, began each of his classes with the phrase, “Of what value is learning, that does not turn to love?”<sup>1</sup> Our goal must always be both.

In one of the famous scenes of the popular TV show *Friday Night Lights*, Coach Taylor rallies his high school football team with what becomes the iconic motto of the show: “Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose.” Doesn't this describe the kind of Christianity that deep down we all long for? Isn't this both/and of head *and* heart exactly what Paul prays for when he writes from a prison cell, “And it is my prayer that your *love* may abound more and more, with *knowledge* and all discernment” (Philippians 1:9)? Doesn't Peter say the same thing? “Finally, all of you, have ... a tender heart, and a humble mind” (1 Peter 3:8). If this is normal Christianity, why should we settle for anything less? Here's some good news: we don't have to choose between theological precision and white-hot passion. God wants us to reject both dead orthodoxy as well as passionate ignorance.

Clear eyes. Full heart. Can't lose.

Right thinking. Right feeling. That is what we are made for.  
Truth that's on fire. That's what this book is all about.

### A PATH FORWARD

A.W. Tozer opened his classic work *The Knowledge of the Holy* with the statement: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>2</sup> Every Christian should want to know accurately what the God they love is actually like. In this way, clear theological thinking becomes to me like a photo of my wife: it reveals to me the beauty of the one I love. Sound doctrine matters, because it shows us the qualities of the God we worship. Biblical literacy matters, because as the author Jen Wilkin reminds us, “The heart cannot love, what the mind does not know.”<sup>3</sup> Each chapter of this book will focus on a specific attribute or quality of God. Section 1 of this book will focus on some of God’s *incommunicable attributes*, that is, those things that are true about him (such as his transcendence and omnipotence) that are only true about *him*. Section 2 zeroes in on some of God’s *communicable attributes*, which are the characteristics of God that can also be increasingly reflected in our own lives (such as love, gentleness, and happiness), as we walk with Jesus.

Along with highlighting the various attributes of God, we will also see how these attributes are personified in Jesus Christ. If Jesus truly is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Hebrews 1:3), then we can expect the attributes of God to be sharpened into high-resolution quality in the life of Jesus. Jesus is not a blurred photocopy of what God is like. He is *exactly* what God is like. So that which might be obscure to us about the nature of God, Jesus brings into focus. We can learn what God is like by getting to know what Jesus, the God-Man, is like.

Finally, our end goal is to not merely fill our minds with true knowledge about God (as important as that is), but for that knowledge to reshape our hearts and experience of God in our daily lives. That’s why each chapter ends with a handful

of questions that can be used for personal reflection or discussion in groups. Good theology matters, but it's not our final destination. It exists to move us into a deeper experience of the one for whom we have been created. It is the rocket-fuel of our worship.

Imagine if an intelligent faith and a passionate faith were both realities in your discipleship to Jesus. Imagine churches that were known for both a high view of the Holy Scriptures as well as a high view of the Holy Spirit (*who, you know, wrote them*).

My hope in these pages is to paint a biblical portrait of what God is *actually* like, so that we can gaze upon him together until our hearts can't help but sing. To behold him in such a way that our daily experience is transformed with a deepened awareness of who it is we pray to, who it is that is with us, and who it is that we are loved by. To think about our God more deeply, in order to enjoy him more intensely. To let God's truth set our hearts on fire.