



INTRODUCTION

SETTING OUR SIGHTS

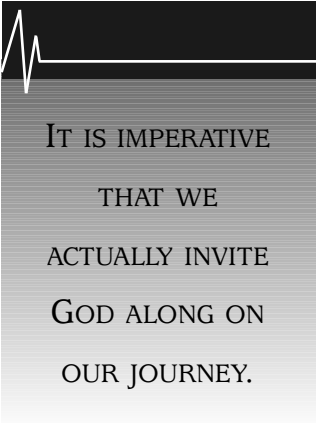
It was the writer and spiritual advisor Thomas à Kempis who once said, “For a small reward a man will hurry away on a long journey, while for eternal life many will hardly take a single step.”¹

Our exhilarating quest into understanding God is a lifelong journey filled with all the eternal and priceless rewards one can possibly imagine! Yet so few people are willing to attempt even a single step. In our day and age, the god of materialism has sidelined the God of the Bible. The god of hedonism and self-centeredness has replaced God our Creator. And the god of our imaginations has made the one true God nearly obsolete in our thinking. Most men and women would rather travel hundreds of miles in search of the worthless “fool’s gold” of the world’s stuff than take a single step toward the never-ending, unfathomable riches of an intimate relationship with our eternal God.

Some attempt the first step on this important journey but never really get past the front porch. Despite the fact that more resources exist now than at any other time in history—books, tapes, videos,

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magazines, seminars, and Web sites—countless believers are still searching for a deep-rooted understanding of God. People are desperately seeking truth but instead are being distracted and disillusioned by pop psychology and a watered-down theology. As a result, more believers than ever are frustrated, bitter, discontented, and searching for answers that make sense in a world that doesn't. The purpose of this book series is to guide a new generation of Christians along on a life-changing journey to intimacy with the Divine—a twenty-first-century-tailored quest that will increase our understanding of the Almighty and radically influence our lives in ways we never imagined.



IT IS IMPERATIVE
THAT WE
ACTUALLY INVITE
GOD ALONG ON
OUR JOURNEY.

Now this may or may not seem obvious to you, but if we ever hope to gain this life-transforming understanding of the one true God on our journey, then it is imperative that we actually *invite God along on our journey*. If you wanted to gain a deep-rooted, intimate understanding of your new bride or groom, you wouldn't trek off on the big honeymoon to Hawaii or the Caribbean and leave your soulmate behind in Bakersfield or Albuquerque!

So I would encourage you to invite God along on this momentous quest. We will venture far beyond the mundane city limits of just a head knowledge of the Divine to attain an exotic, extraordinary *understanding* of our heavenly Father who deeply loves each and every one of us.

But perhaps this isn't why you chose this book. Your appetite or expectations may be somewhat different. Maybe you slid this book off the shelf hoping to find an engaging philosophical debate on the existence of God. If you did, you may be somewhat disappointed.² Or perhaps you chose this book series for its intriguing title; needing something to pass the time, you'll allow the words go in one ear and out the other.

INTRODUCTION

There's a chance you didn't even choose this book at all. Maybe a well-meaning friend bought it for you, and rather than insult your pal, you've agreed to read it. So you'll find a comfy couch, some Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and the TV remote, hoping you can skim through the pages during commercials in *Oprah* or the Monday night football game.

But I hope and pray that you've selected this book for a much different reason: I hope that God, working supernaturally in your life, has brought you to the place where you humbly recognize your need of someone bigger than yourself. This need may represent a longing for a personal relationship with your heavenly Father. Or it may symbolize a highly sought-after quest—a lifelong “second honeymoon,” so to speak—to develop a more intimate understanding of your Creator and Lord.

If this is your craving—your honest, heartfelt desire—then I invite you to turn the page, and take the first step on this life-changing expedition with me.



Part One

PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY

IS GOD OBSOLETE?

Understanding God, for the dedicated and faithful believer, is a day-by-day, hour-by-hour, mind-, heart-, and soul-grappling journey, yielding priceless and unfathomable treasures ... sometimes by the minute ... sometimes when the saint is least expecting it...



1

“MAY I TAKE YOUR ORDER?”

I stood over the limp and bloody body of a sixteen-year-old Hispanic kid—my hand deep inside his chest, massaging his heart.

“Keep going!” barked the chief resident.

I felt the warm muscle slither between my gloved fingers as I squeezed. With so much blood, the boundary between my fingers and the tissue became almost indistinguishable. Nevertheless, everyone in the emergency room knew what I held in my hand.

Months earlier I had crammed my belongings into a couple of suitcases, hopped on a plane, and flown to Los Angeles to begin my surgical residency. From almost the first day of medical school, I had dreamed of becoming a plastic surgeon. Now here was my big chance. Having worked in my parents’ small-town jewelry store for eleven summers, repairing watches and intricate jewelry, I felt right at home wielding other fine instruments—namely a scalpel and a needle driver.

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But my big chance spawned an even bigger challenge: I needed to survive my demanding general surgery rotations (80–115 hour work weeks) at the prestigious Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, a first-class hospital known worldwide for its five-star, round-the-clock care of the rich



IN ALL THIS
DEATH, SUFFERING,
AND HATE—
WHERE WAS GOD?

and famous. Day and night, in a semi jet-lagged state of existence, I cared for a host of sick patients—discovering early on that when disease, suffering, and death come knocking in Tinseltown, absolutely no one is immune.

In contrast to our elective surgery cases, in the ER we could never predict the social status of our next trauma victim. The body lying deathly still on the stretcher before me didn't belong to a celebrity. No one knew this kid. The tattoos etched across his now distorted chest identified him with a local gang. But that was it. All we knew was that he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. A knife thrust deep into his chest had penetrated the heart, severing a vital artery.

It isn't every day that a chest is cracked open in an emergency room—even in LA. No anesthetist. No detailed scrubbing preparation. No time-consuming protocols here. Just a last-ditch, desperate attempt to save a human life.

And yet, despite the frantic hustle around me, the evolving events seemed to be slowing down, unfolding like an old eight-millimeter silent home movie flipped into slow motion. Frame by frame I squeezed his heart—then loosened my grip.

Still, the heart refused to beat.

My mind strayed to the patients I had treated over the previous months. The good-humored, middle-aged businessman: He was exiting a theater one night with his wife when the pair was suddenly blindsided by a mugger who demanded their wallets. Without hesitation, the man quickly relinquished his money—only to be rewarded seconds later with a bullet to the upper face. In the operating room,

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I surveyed the bullet's bloody path, wondering what force was responsible for stopping the bullet just millimeters from the frontal lobe of this man's brain.

The wealthy and prominent Hollywood producer: Once powerful and robust in LA's glamour circles, he now struggled to keep down a single morsel of bread in his cancer-ravaged body. There was little I could do.

The polite, twentysomething gay guy with AIDS: He fought for every breath as I stopped by daily to check on the status of the tubes and suctioning device sucking air and bloody fluid out of his weakened chest. I felt sorry that I had to wake him every morning between 5:45 and 6:15 on my rounds. Fortunately, he was one of the last stops on my routine circuit so he got to sleep in more than most of my patients.

The notorious gangbanger: Bullet fragments still embedded in his brain, he miraculously paraded past the hospital rooms of innocent bystanders who had been caught in gang crossfire, and walked out of the hospital; innocent bystanders, some of whom, remained helplessly crippled. Why did we just leave the chunks of lead buried in his brain? There was no reason for us to remove the bullets like you might see in some outlandish, grotesque “B” movie. He was doing quite fine.

Fortune seemed to play favorites with the innocent and the guilty.

The African-American woman in her fifties: She had watched powerlessly as her husband was tied up in their own home and then shot to death. The assailant, apparently out of bullets, grabbed a nearby hammer and repeatedly dented and broke through her skull with the claw end of the metal instrument. Holding a small suction tube, I moved the fine tip delicately through the bloody mess of fragmented bone and tattered brain matter in this woman's head. Despite our best surgical efforts, the woman continued in a vegetative state, later being transferred to a chronic-care facility.

Fortune definitely seemed to play favorites with the innocent and the guilty....

The disjointed eight-millimeter frames continued to roll through my head like a slow-paced movie trailer promoting a dark, demented film.

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But even as the scenes played out, I was keenly aware of what was happening in this precise moment. Looking past the tattoos and endotracheal

tube, I gazed into the still face of the gangster who was really just a lost kid; and as his hope for survival diminished by the second, the questions sneaked into the defenseless places of my heart.

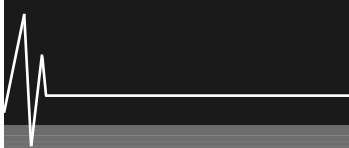
In all this death, suffering, and hate—where was God? What kind of a God would allow evil to bounce helter-skelter from person to person, leaving heartache and death in its path?

What was God thinking?

These pointed questions represent only the crest of a giant tidal wave—a steadily rising wall of questions that keeps growing with every “mile” of time. The triumph of the wicked caused Israel’s greatest leader, King David, a man after God’s own heart, to cry out, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1). “Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?” (Ps. 74:1b). Similarly, the patriarch Job, famous for his patience, cried out to God, “Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden

to you?” (Job 7:20b). Even Jesus, the Son of God, while hanging on the cross between heaven and earth, uttered the words, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*”—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34b).

Today the media bombards us with countless reports of tragedies. Victims and bereaved families raise the all-too-familiar question: *Why?*



IT DOESN'T MATTER
WHAT CONTINENT
WE CALL HOME,
WHAT COLOR OUR
SKIN IS, OR WHAT
CHURCH, TEMPLE,
OR SYNAGOGUE WE
ATTEND; SOONER OR
LATER WE WILL
QUESTION THE
ALMIGHTY'S COMPE-
TENCY IN RUNNING
THE UNIVERSE.

“MAY I TAKE YOUR ORDER?”

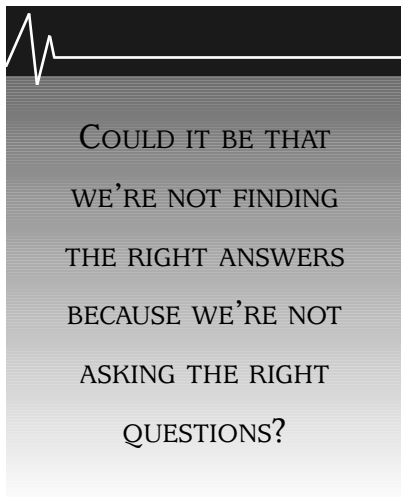
Why would a God of love allow an earthquake to kill more than 50,000 people? Why would he let a tsunami snuff out the lives of more than 150,000 people in one day? Couldn't the Creator of the universe have stopped a simple fuel leak from killing three hundred people aboard a commercial jet? Why can't God prevent a handful of terrorists from killing thousands of people? And why can't our all-powerful sovereign Lord prevent a microscopic AIDS virus from killing millions? If God really exists and has power, why does this tidal wave of questions even exist?

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

To question God is only human. It doesn't matter what continent we call home, what color our skin is, or what church, temple, or synagogue we attend; sooner or later we will question the Almighty's competency in running the universe.

Chances are, your life has already collided with this mighty tidal wave of questions. Maybe you've cried out to God from a church pew, demanding to know why your only child lies at the front in a silk-lined casket. Maybe you've whispered the words from a hospital room, tears streaming down your cheeks as you held your best friend's hand. Or perhaps you've cried yourself to sleep, feeling the empty place beside you where your husband or wife used to lie.

Perhaps you've fought desperately to get around this towering obstacle of questions—but to no avail. Maybe you've given up on God, completely worn down from asking questions that seem to cyclone into even more questions. Your anger has turned to apathy. Your bitterness has been transformed into feelings of helplessness. For



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you, life is a cruel, twisted maze that keeps changing by the hour, a tortuous maze for which God has seemingly provided no solution—essentially no way out.



REGARDLESS,
THOUGH, OF WHO—
OR WHAT—WE
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TO REMAIN THE
SAME.

It's easy in discouraging times like these to question and blame our heavenly Father. Many of us grew up hearing the all-too-familiar phrase "God loves you." You may have wondered, *If God loves me so much, why am I suffering? Why can't a loving God shield me from this unbearable pain? Why does he allow people to suffer to the point that they throw up their hands and deny his existence?*

And yet, could it be that we're not finding the right answers because we're not asking the right questions? Do we, as Charles Swindoll points out, make the all-too-common mistake of viewing life from a horizontal perspective when

we should be gazing on life from a vertical—a divine—perspective? Do we get so taken up with trying to make sense of life from our restricted viewpoint on earth that we never really step back to see the big picture through the eyes of God in heaven? How can we ask the right questions when we're gazing at life from the wrong perspective?

What's more, we automatically assume that the "right answers" should make sense to absolutely everyone on the planet.

Could it be, though, that our frustration with God's answers—or apparent lack of answers—is because we don't understand the God we're questioning? Do we really have a solid understanding of God's holiness, justice, sovereignty, wisdom, and love? Are we asking the proper questions, from the proper perspective, based on a proper understanding of God?

Maybe not. After all, not everyone questions—or abandons—the same God of Abraham. Some of us believe in a different "force" or, as one writer puts it, "a personification—of life force or society or order or some

“MAY I TAKE YOUR ORDER?”

blend of such personifications.”¹ Though approximately 95 percent of Americans would say they “believe in God,”² we know that almost 10 percent of those in this category believe in a nameless “higher power”³ or an aloof “universal spirit.” (Fewer than eight in ten Americans believe in a personal heavenly Father who protects us and responds to prayers.)⁴

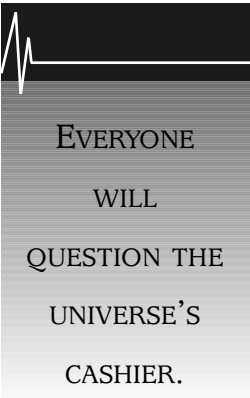
Regardless, though, of who—or what—we believe is in charge, the questions seem to remain the same. We “instinctively expect”⁵ only good from this higher power, as if it were our legitimate cosmic right to perpetually enjoy the “Happy Meals” of life. And when the “cosmic cashier” screws up and slides us something we didn’t order, we grow angry and start questioning the cashier’s competency—not to mention his intelligence, motives, and dedication in serving us, the “paying customer.”

Everyone will, at some point in his or her life, question the universe’s cashier. When the questions outnumber the answers, the atheist rationally concludes that God—or this cosmic cashier—doesn’t exist. With so many “Happy Meal” orders getting screwed up, how can there possibly be a God?

While an atheist believes there is no God, an agnostic, according to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, “holds that the existence of God cannot be logically proved or disproved.”⁶ It was the English biologist T. H. Huxley who first invented the word *agnostic* because he was fed up with everyone constantly labeling him an atheist.

Granted, many agnostics nowadays argue that the definition above is shallow and misleading. An agnostic, they assert, can still believe in the existence of the Almighty while believing that “the nature of God is unknown, and probably unknowable.”⁷ There may be a divine cashier on duty, but we’ll probably never know, much less understand, the cashier’s nature—and why our Happy Meals don’t keep coming.

I’ve time and again pondered what it must be like for atheists and agnostics, or anyone else for that matter, to traipse through life’s convoluted maze without the divine Father by their side. As a



EVERYONE
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child, memorizing Bible verses and attending church every Sunday made it difficult—if not impossible—for me to envision anyone without God.



THE ANSWER LAY
IN SOMETHING FAR
MORE DEEP AND
PROFOUND—AN
UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD.

Recently, I came across the writings of J. I. Packer, a prominent theologian, who argued that traveling through life without God is as “cruel to ourselves” as dropping an “Amazonian tribesman” into London’s chaotic Trafalgar Square. “Disregard the study of God,” he says, and you will “sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.”⁸

But I ask, “Is this analogy particularly fair?” Do atheists, agnostics, and everyone else who rejects the God of Abraham and Isaac really travel through life apprehensive—blundering along with no understanding whatsoever of life’s events whizzing past them?

I would have to agree with the ordained minister and theologian J. B. Phillips, who argues that a prevailing wall of ignorance separates those who do not know God from those who claim they do.⁹ Just as I will never know what it’s like for an atheist or agnostic to live life without God, so too will most atheists and agnostics never know what it’s like to walk down life’s alleys hand in hand with an intimate and loving heavenly Father. Admittedly, some do find out eventually.

The Oxford and Cambridge Professor C. S. Lewis, once known as a “happy atheist,”¹⁰ embraced God as his Savior when he was about thirty years of age. Later, Lewis became the celebrated Christian author of more than twenty-five books, including the Chronicles of Narnia series. “Few 20th-century figures have more pervasively influenced Christendom than C. S. Lewis,” writes Dr. Gerard Reed.¹¹ And Josh McDowell, a former agnostic who once tried to disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ, has since authored or coauthored more than seventy-seven books for his Creator. “Few individuals have had as

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wide an impact for the Christian faith on university audiences as Josh McDowell,” says Billy Graham.¹²

In contrast to McDowell, many searching agnostics fail to push the doorbell after arriving at God’s doorstep. Blinded by life’s tragedies and uncertainties, they ask, “Cannot God [if he exists] treat us as intelligent adults and let us have at least a few hints as to what life is all about?”¹³

Indeed, is this not the same question that nearly *everyone* seems to be asking? Why has God left us here on this earth to fend for ourselves without letting us in on at least some of the mysteries of life?

THE CONTROLLING QUESTION

As my medical career progressed, I discovered that my patients and their families were asking similar questions—but not out loud. They didn’t scream down the halls, “GOD! Why am I suffering with pancreatic cancer? I trusted you, and look what you did!” Fathers and mothers didn’t stand atop the hospital roof shouting out defiantly, “GOD! Why did you allow my child to be shot in the head? What kind of a God are you anyway?”

They didn’t do these things. Instead, they bundled up all their anger, all their frustration and bitterness, and heaved it at the doctors, nurses, and whoever else was involved in their care. I didn’t always know who was asking what questions—but I always knew who wasn’t getting the answers they were looking for.

Then I made another interesting observation: My most exasperating, most abusive patients, along with their even more abusive families, didn’t fall into any particular “God-belief” category. In fact, some of my worst experiences were with those who had supposedly dedicated their lives to God. The pastor would finish praying with the family, say a few encouraging words, and then—walking past the leather Bible on the nightstand—exit the room.

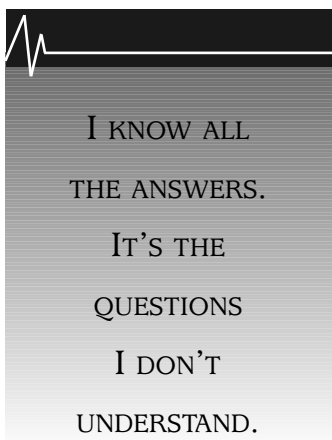
A few minutes later I’d step into the same room, and WHOOSH!—one tomahawk anger missile would come hurtling at

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me! Often it came via a family member: “The nurse didn’t change the bandages yet this morning! The therapists aren’t pushing him enough! The therapists were ten minutes late! Why did you prescribe Tylenol without asking me? You ordered the X-ray thirty minutes ago—where is it? The eggs are cold! I ordered scrambled eggs! My father didn’t get his eggs!” And so on. I remember one mother who would glare at me every time I set foot in the room, as if I were the one who had pulled the trigger on her fifteen-year-old boy, now disabled.

Fortunately for doctors and the medical community as a whole, the majority of patients don’t act this way. Many merely attribute their tragic circumstances to “bad luck,” believing that no higher power is responsible for their misfortunes. How can they be angry with God when he isn’t even in control?

When I took a closer look at some of my model patients, however, I discovered that they shared a common belief with some of my most demanding patients: a belief that God was definitely in control, allowing whatever tragedy it was to strike. And I wondered:



I KNOW ALL
THE ANSWERS.
IT’S THE
QUESTIONS
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UNDERSTAND.

Why such a radical difference in behavior between these two groups of patients? If patients with similar tragedies truly believed that God was in complete control, why were some so incredibly angry with God while others, seemingly, were not?

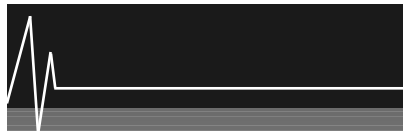
In the years that followed I searched for the answer, and eventually I found it. The answer didn’t lie, however, in the power of positive thinking. It didn’t lie in education or social status. Nor did it lie in membership to a particular religious denomination. The answer lay in something far more deep and profound—*an understanding of God*.

I’m not talking merely about a head knowledge of the Almighty, but also a deep-rooted, heart-penetrating understanding of God’s

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incomparable character and his sometimes mysterious ways. In essence, one group believed God *owed* them a long life of happiness and health in exchange for their loyalty, and the other group did not.

No doubt my model patients who trusted God were angry. But their anger was not directly rooted in the belief that they deserved only “Happy Meals” from God. Their anger was more a righteous indignation at the wickedness that had deprived them of their health—whether it came via a drunk driver or imperfect genes stemming from Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Anger is not necessarily wrong in and of itself, but the driving force *behind* the anger is what must be carefully analyzed.



EVEN IF YOUR HEART
AND MIND WILL NOT
EMBRACE GOD AT THIS
POINT, I PRAY THAT
ONE DAY YOUR SOUL
WILL YEARN WITH
AN UNQUENCHABLE
PASSION TO REACH
OUT AND TOUCH THE
BLINDING RADIANCE
OF HIS GLORY.

SHRINKING THE TIDAL WAVE

I fondly remember many early childhood visits to my beloved grandparents. My deeply imprinted memories of them are even more cherished now that they are gone. My grandfather was a humble man with a big heart and an even bigger laugh. He loved to repeat jokes and favorite sayings and then laugh as though it were the first time he had ever told them.

Occasionally I would wander into his study; sometimes he was there, sorting through paperwork for his lumber mill, but often he

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wasn't. I'd curiously meander about the cluttered, dusty room, examining his peculiar collection of timeworn books, paintings, and photographs.

On one such occasion I noticed, just above the doorway, an oval wooden plaque that I had overlooked on previous excursions. I had heard my grandfather laughingly say the words, but this was the first time I had actually set my little eyes on them. In bold black script across the plaque was this maxim:

I know all the answers.
It's the questions
I don't understand.

Thinking back, I believe my grandfather kept the plaque there as a humorous warning to himself—as well as to those who mistakenly thought they knew all the answers. Similarly, I purpose to keep this plaque above the doorway of my mind, lest—in writing this book series—I mislead my readers into thinking that we can know all the answers. I admit straight off that I don't possess all the answers. No one does except God. And anyone who tells you otherwise probably doesn't understand the questions.

Nonetheless, God has certainly left us some valuable truths as to what life is all about; indispensable clues that allow us a deeper, though limited, understanding of his character—and consequently, a deeper understanding of who we are and why we exist. We will attempt to rise above this baffling tidal wave of questions by examining the question “What was God thinking?” but to think that we can reduce centuries of towering questions to a trivial little puddle is foolishly absurd.

I confess that tackling such a mammoth and noble subject as What was God thinking? and trying to contain the material in a few small books will be no easy task. In many ways it's like trying to cram the world-famous 300-acre Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, containing more than 40,000 kinds of plants, into an average-sized backyard. Sure, you could pick a glorious array of beautiful and

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exotic plants to fill your little patch, but barely a dent would be made in Britain’s lavish garden.

Still, I have carefully selected the most exquisite “plants” (the series subject matter) using two criteria: one, those perfections, or attributes, of God that give rise to the most questions and confusion; and two, those perfections of God that, when firmly grasped in our hearts, will have the greatest impact on our lives.

While I will do my best in this book series to “take your order” by responding to many of your toughest questions about God, I have to forewarn that you may not get exactly what you request. Since gaining a *true* understanding of God is our primary goal, I’m not going to cheat you by serving up a God you may *want*. Instead, I’m going to richly describe and illustrate for you a God you *desperately need*. A God so preciously unique, so utterly radiant, so infinitely wise, so wonderfully loving, and so magnificently holy, that even if your heart and mind will not embrace God at this point, I pray that one day your soul will yearn with an unquenchable passion to reach out and touch the blinding radiance of his glory.