

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

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I was feeling pretty exuberant as I entered the meeting that night. When a good friend appeared, I shouted to him across the room, “Come on over here, in the name of Jesus!” Moments later another young man quietly drew me aside and expressed his concern that I was treating the name of Jesus in a flippant manner. Flushing red with embarrassment, I mumbled, “Thanks for pointing that out.” It was apparent that he was concerned for me personally. I also knew he was right, and that he was showing more regard for God’s honor than I had. Though I certainly didn’t intend any harm, I realized from this incident that I had become overly familiar with the Lord’s name.

It hadn’t started out that way. At the time of my conversion three years before, I had been overwhelmed by God’s power to change my life. Meetings pervaded by his presence and remarkable answers to prayer had convinced me of the reality of the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus Christ. Who else could have so thoroughly overcome the depression and hopelessness that had engulfed me? But as the intensity of those first months gradually subsided into a more consistent faith, something else had crept in. God’s majestic greatness was being eroded by a growing familiarity. It was high time to consider again the holiness of God.

Holiness. The word itself conjures up images of humorless monks in colorless monasteries eating tasteless food and leading joyless lives. Or perhaps long faces, long dresses, and long lists of “don’ts.” But how about *beauty*? Does the word holiness prompt thoughts of beauty? Probably not. Yet beauty is a quality often associated with God’s holiness. In the Psalms we’re exhorted to worship the Lord “in the beauty of holiness” (Ps 29:2; 96:9 AV). Holiness is said to forever enhance the appearance of God’s temple: “Your statutes stand firm; holiness adorns your house for endless days, O Lord” (Ps 93:5).

Meditate on
1 Chronicles 16:23-36. Do you pick up any sense of spiritual drudgery in David’s attitude toward the holiness of God?

In spite of the clear and positive regard the Bible has for holiness, most of us would still equate it with drudgery. At the mere mention of the word our minds move toward what we perceive to be our responsibilities as Christians. But any accurate understanding of holiness must trace its way back to the source of all holiness—God himself. And when we view the holiness of God, we’re not dealing with human responsibility at all but with God’s most attractive and awe-inspiring attribute.

Theologian Stephen Charnock points out that among the various qualities of God, there are some we prefer because of the blessing we immediately gain from them. For instance, we would rather sing of the mercy of the Lord than think about his justice and wrath. We’re more inclined to reflect on a loving Savior than to consider a jealous God. There are some divine attributes, however, that God himself delights in because they so perfectly express his excellence. Holiness is such an attribute.¹ Those mysterious heavenly beings, the seraphs and the four living creatures, know that the holiness of God must be underscored. Think of it. They dwell in his presence and have an unobstructed view of reality (while we see through a glass dimly). If any beings were ever “in the know,” they are. And so, over and over, day and night, they never cease crying out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Is 6:3, Rev 4:8).

Holiness differs from God’s other perfections in that it spreads itself throughout all the other attributes. Thus his love is a *holy* love, his justice a *holy* justice, and so forth. If God’s attributes could be thought of as the various facets of a diamond, then holiness would be the combined brightness of those facets shining out in radiant glory.

Religious Superstitions

Scripture has a great deal to say about holiness. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, outlines man’s ruin. Then Exodus, with its central image of the Passover lamb, shows his recovery. Next comes the book of Leviticus. Ah, Leviticus—that book in which so many aspiring students of the Bible have bogged down in their annual attempt to read through the Bible, never to reappear. Yet this book is crucial to our understanding of holiness. Leviticus also sheds important light on the sacrificial atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the book of Leviticus God shows man how to

Meditate on Matthew 5:17-20. Do you think this could explain why the New Testament contains about 90 references to the book of Leviticus?

approach him in worship. The book focuses primarily on the different sacrifices that God required in order for his

“ It is always necessary to remind ourselves of the grandeur of this absolute moral perfection, which encircles the Divine Person. Without it, true worship would degenerate and man would become presumptuous.³

— T.C. Hammond

people to *get right* with him, and then the different feasts God ordained so that they could *stay right* with him.² As confusing and irrelevant as this elaborate sacrificial system may appear to us today, God instituted it in order to instruct his people in the profound truth that *he is holy*.

The word holiness implies a separation from all that is impure.⁴ God is different from us. He is *other* than we are. Though this may seem elementary, it needs to be stated because of current notions about “New Age” powers within us and a supposed inherent divinity of mankind.

In Scripture, the ordinary things that God touches become extraordinary. For example, because it was the place of divine revelation, the area surrounding the burning bush was marked out as holy ground and it became appropriate for Moses to remove his sandals out of reverence for God. Or consider the utensils used in the service of the tabernacle and the temple. They weren’t ordinary either. They were holy. So also were holy assemblies, holy altars, holy anointing oil, and holy days.

What made them holy? A holy God. God selected common things and made them special by setting them apart for holy purposes, specifically to communicate to his people that *he* is holy.

Unfortunately, many people miss this point badly and end up in religious superstition. I once received a late-night call from an elderly lady requesting that I meet her for prayer. She insisted that it couldn’t wait and that we must meet at “the house of God.” I suggested that, considering the hour, a public place might be more appropriate than an empty church building, but she kept insisting that we meet at “the house of God.” This dear lady had fallen into the error of ascribing to a place a certain special quality that belongs to God alone. She did not realize that in this New Testament era, no place is inherently holy—not even the “Holy Land.”

The prophet Jeremiah, aware of a similar attitude among his people, wrote, “Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!’” (Jer 7:4). Despite their rev-

For Further Study:

The Pharisees carried religious superstition to the extreme, as seen in Matthew 23:16-22. Did Jesus commend their behavior?

1 The Bible passages below demonstrate three cases where reverence for a religious artifact, ritual, or building damaged the people's relationship with God. In the space below each reference, briefly summarize the problem.

■ Numbers 21:6-9; 2 Kings 18:1-4

■ Luke 13:10-16

■ Mark 13:1-2; Matthew 26:59-62;
Matthew 12:3-6

Meditate on 1 Samuel 6:19-20. Does your awe of God match that the men of Beth Shemesh experienced?

erence for the temple's physical structure, the Israelites who kept repeating "The temple of the Lord" regrettably had hearts far removed from the Lord of the temple.

I see the same thing happen when unsaved couples who have no interest in following Jesus Christ nevertheless consider it absolutely essential that they be married in a church building. What else can this be but a superstitious feeling that somehow their marriage will be blessed if it takes place in a "holy" building? Putting undue emphasis on buildings or ceremonies or religious artifacts does nothing to show honor and respect for God.

God, in Scripture, did set apart certain things for special use, but he had a point in doing so—to teach us that *he* is holy and must be held in respect.

For this reason, then, to use holy things in a profane or common manner was offensive to God.

The fifth chapter of Daniel recounts the familiar story of the handwriting on the wall, when God inscribed his divine judgment against the king of Babylon. What prompted his wrath? Belshazzar had profaned what God declared holy, as Daniel recounts: "So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (Da 5:3-4).

When Daniel was called in to decipher the mysterious writing, he took the opportunity to roundly rebuke the king. His final words summed up Belshazzar's sin: "You did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" (Da 5:23).

Belshazzar's failure to honor the things of God amounted to a failure to honor God; his blasphemy cost him his life. Incidents like this are sprinkled throughout the Bible to warn of what can happen when someone decides to play fast and loose with the things of God. Whether immediately or at the end of the age, judgment will be enacted for sins against God's holiness.

The “Disintegration Factor”

God is so different from us. Though we’re created in his image, his thoughts and his ways are so far beyond ours that Isaiah likens it to the distance between the heavens and the earth (Isa. 55: 8, 9). Perhaps this is nowhere clearer than in regard to his moral excellence. As the prophet Habakkuk expressed it, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong” (Hab 1:13).

God’s absolute purity goes beyond mere sinlessness. It is a positive expression of his goodness, not just the absence

“ How slow we are to believe in God as God, sovereign, all-seeing and almighty! How little we make of the majesty of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! The need for us is to ‘wait upon the Lord’ in meditations of his majesty, till we find our strength renewed through the writing of these things upon our hearts.⁵

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— J.I. Packer

of sin. We’ve all met people whose character shines so much brighter than our own that we feel small and stained by comparison. I have a friend who, before he shaved off his beard, looked like a combination of Abraham Lincoln and Jesus (as depicted in contemporary illustrations, that is). The similarity isn’t merely in physical appearance, either. His kind-

ness and gentle wisdom are truly exceptional. Though it would distress him to know this, being around him reminds me of my own selfishness. If human comparisons can make us feel that low, imagine the discomfort we would feel in the presence of a holy God!

This is exactly what happened to Peter. Jesus amazed Peter one day by providing a miraculous catch of fish. But instead of rejoicing in the haul, all Peter could see was his own sinfulness. When confronted with the holiness of Jesus, Peter saw himself as he really was, and the reality of it was devastating. “Simon Peter...fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’” (Lk 5:8).

It didn’t take Peter long to lose sight of the Lord’s holiness, as we see four chapters later on the mount of transfiguration. This sublime incident featured a visit from two of the most celebrated persons of Israel’s past, Moses and Elijah. To top it off, a transfigured Jesus became as bright as lightning. Yet Peter, instead of falling before the Lord as he had done previously, seemed oblivious to what was taking place. He became chatty and suggested that maybe they could make some temporary shelters for everyone. That’s when God the Father intervened personally. “While [Peter] was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped

For Further Study:

If you want fresh revelation of God’s sovereign power and holiness, try this abbreviated word study of “tremble”— Exodus 15:13-16; Job 9:4-6; Psalms 99:1-3; Isaiah 64:1-4; Jeremiah 23:9; Ezekiel 38:20-23; Joel 3:16; Habakkuk 3:6.

2 Read John's description of Jesus Christ in Revelation 1:10-16. What details strike you most vividly?

them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Lk 9:34-35). This seems to have had a sobering effect on Peter and the others, for as Matthew points out, "When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground, terrified" (Mt 17:6).

The prophet Isaiah had a dramatic experience which marked him forever. He saw a vision of the Lord "seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train

of his robe filled the temple" (Is 6:1). In this vision angelic beings were declaring the overwhelming holiness of God. "At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke" (v.4). Utterly

““ When [God's] divine judgment fell on Nadab or Uzzah, the response was shock and outrage. We have come to expect God to be merciful. From there the next step is easy: we demand it. When it is not forthcoming, our first response is anger against God, coupled with the protest: "It isn't fair." We soon forget that with our first sin we have forfeited all rights to the gift of life. That I am drawing breath this morning is an act of divine mercy. God owes me nothing. I owe him everything.”

— R.C. Sproul

undone by the awesome display, Isaiah responded in the only appropriate way: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (v.5).

Some have called Isaiah's experience the "disintegration factor." R.C. Sproul writes, "For the first time in his life Isaiah really understood who God was. At the same instant, for the first time Isaiah really understood

who Isaiah was."⁷ If the word "integrity" means wholeness (an integer is a whole number), disintegration means to be broken into pieces. Most of us are trying so hard to get our lives "together." And even if we're falling apart, we'd at least like to appear to be "together." How distressing, then, to be in the presence of God and fall completely apart as we discover the depth of our own sinfulness.

For Further Study:

The following passages reveal angelic encounters—Numbers 22:21-31; Judges 6:20-23; Matthew 28:2-4; Luke 2:8-10.

Approaching a Holy God

The awareness of one's sinfulness initially produces an aversion to God. In almost every biblical account of angel-

“ God is the only comfort, he is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from...Some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing with religion.⁸

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— C.S. Lewis

ic visitations, the individuals fall down in abject fear. How much more those who see God in his awesome holiness? The Israelites who stood before Mount Sinai as it quaked with the holy presence of God begged Moses to be their intermediary, their go-between. Moses reminds them of this:

When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leading men of your tribes and your elders came to me. And you said, “The Lord our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a man can live even if God speaks with him. But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer. For what mortal man has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived? Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey” (Dt 5:23-27).

I once heard John Wimber refer to people who do not want a relationship with God because they consider it too dangerous. They would prefer a relationship with Christianity or with the church. While this is undoubtedly the

3 In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, author C.S. Lewis uses the noble lion Aslan to portray Jesus. At one point a character says of Aslan, “It’s not as if he were a tame lion.”⁹ Can you think of any examples from the Bible or your own interaction with God that show he isn’t “tame”?

case with some, a true Christian has the desire to be holy. He knows that only the pure in heart shall see God (Mt 5:8), and he longs for that purity that will enable him to behold his Lord. For the maturing Christian, an awareness of God’s holiness reassures him of God’s love. He realizes that in spite of God’s holiness and his own sinfulness, the Lord is long-suffering toward him. He deserves judgment but instead receives mercies which are new every morning.

We may consider our attempts to live the Christian life to be feeble indeed, but if we have a desire for holiness we can take heart. God is the One who put that desire there and he is certain to bring it to pass. But how? How will we

Meditate on Hebrews 10:19-23. How has our High Priest rewritten the law about entering the Most Holy Place?

fulfill God's seemingly impossible command, "Be holy, because I am holy" (1Pe 1:16)? How can we approach "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and *who lives in unapproachable light*, whom no one has seen or can see" (1Ti 6:15-16, emphasis added)?

We must approach with reverence, as is strikingly displayed through the ministry of the Old Testament priest. In order for the priest to approach God, there were closely prescribed regulations. One could not go into the Holy of Holies anytime he wished. The high priest entered the most holy place just one day each year on the Day of Atonement. He first had to offer a sacrifice for himself, the blood serving as a reminder to him of his sinfulness and God's holiness. Then he had to dress in special garments. On the hem of his robe were alternating pomegranates and bells which would jingle to give evidence that he was still alive, that he had not been slain by the holiness of God. According to tradition, a length of rope was tied to the priest so that if he died in God's presence the other priests could pull him out without having to go in themselves.

These elaborate precautions were a clear warning: Don't trifle with the holiness of God. Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu learned that lesson the hard way. When these priests tried a new way of burning incense before the Lord, "fire came out from the presence of the Lord and

“ O sinner, can you give any reason why, since you have risen from your bed this morning, God has not stricken you dead?¹⁰ ”

— Jonathan Edwards

consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev 10:2). (Needless to say, it was the last time they did anything novel.) In the soberness of that moment, Moses reminded Aaron of the Lord's words: "Among those who approach me I

will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored" (Lev 10:4). No passage better reflects the Old Testament's central revelation, as summed up by Solomon: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Pr 1:7).

Reverence is essential, but we would never get anywhere near the holy presence of God if it weren't for our mediator, Christ Jesus himself. A mediator is one who bridges the gap between two opposing parties. Our sin has alienated and angered God. Yet it hasn't stopped him from loving us. His holiness in no way implies a reluctance on

his part to receive us. To the contrary, he took the initiative in sending his Son to put away our sins so that in Christ we might come into his presence and enjoy him forever. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2Co 5:19). Jesus Christ, as our mediator, suffered the penalty for our disobedience in order to make reconciliation possible. But salvation was the collective desire and cooperative effort of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let me offer one final insight from the Old Testament priesthood. It was the priest’s responsibility to mediate

“ The holiness of God teaches us that there is only one way to deal with sin—radically, seriously, painfully, constantly. If you do not so live, you do not live in the presence of the Holy One of Israel.¹¹ ”

— Sinclair Ferguson

between God and the people. On each shoulder of the high priest’s garment was an onyx stone engraved with the names of six tribes of the nation of Israel. On the breastpiece of his robe were twelve different gemstones, one for each of the twelve tribes. As he entered the

Holy of Holies, the priest symbolically bore the people of God on his shoulders and on his heart. In New Testament times, of course, Jesus is our High Priest. So great is his love for us that he also carries us on his shoulders, bearing our burdens, and as our compassionate friend, keeps us close to his heart.

Knowing Jesus as our mediator enables us to see God not just as a consuming fire but as a Father to whom we have been reconciled.¹² We ought to apply ourselves to know and appreciate this vital ministry of our Lord Jesus. Comprehending the significance of his priesthood will provoke sincere gratitude and a greater awareness of all that God has done for us.

Meditate on Isaiah 57:15. Why would our holy God choose the second dwelling mentioned in this verse?

Meditate on 2 Corinthians 7:1. What is our motive for pursuing holiness? What is our method?

Ours to Share

One of the most astounding promises in all of Scripture is the assurance that we will share in the holiness of God: “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb 12:10).

When we give serious consideration to our Lord’s holiness it seems unbelievable that we could experience some measure of it. But that’s what this passage from Hebrews clearly states. As surely as God disciplines his children

“ Holiness is not an experience; it is the re-integration of our character, the rebuilding of a ruin. It is skilled labor, a long-term project, demanding everything God has given us for life and godliness.¹³

— Sinclair Ferguson ”

(and the passage leaves no doubt about that), we will enjoy a portion of his holiness.

That this promise involves discipline should not put us off. Discipline is God's proven method of perfecting his children, and his kind of discipline requires

our active participation. This twelfth chapter of Hebrews calls for vigorous effort on our part. Notice the language of exertion the writer employs: “Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles” (v.1)... “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (v.1)... “In your struggle against sin” (v.4)... “endure hardship” (v.7)... “strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees” (v.12)... “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; *without holiness no one will see the Lord*” (v.14, emphasis added). Our Father's discipline may be temporarily painful, but it outfits us for spending eternity with a holy God.

4 All of the spiritual disciplines listed below can help you grow in personal holiness. Check the one discipline in which you feel most deficient.

- Bible study
- Prayer
- Confession/Accountability
- Worship
- Fasting

Jacob was a man who certainly went through his share of difficulties, many of them self-inflicted. But at the end of his life he was no longer Jacob. His name was Israel. Along the way there had come a name change and a change in character as well. He walked with a limp, leaned on his staff, and worshiped God as the Holy One (Heb 1:21).

Jeremiah said, “It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed” (La 3:22 KJV). We deserve no better treatment than what Nadab and Abihu

received. But far from being consumed, we find ourselves the objects of divine love.

Perhaps nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the circumstances surrounding the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. He was a zealous persecutor of the early church, responsible for the deaths of many men and women who were followers of Jesus Christ. While Saul was on an official journey to Damascus to ferret out and punish Christians, the Lord himself dramatically intervened and put a stop to his activities. In recounting the incident to King Agrippa years later, Paul said:

For Further Study:

Read how Aaron led the Israelites in idolatry while Moses was meeting with God (Ex 32:1-10, 19-28). Contrast that with God's eventual consecration of Aaron as high priest (Ex 39:27-31, 40:12-16). Did Aaron get what he deserved?

“About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you’” (Ac 26:13-16).

It's fascinating that Saul emerged from this encounter alive. God would have been completely justified in destroying him right there on the Damascus road. But instead of receiving justice at the hands of the holy One he was persecuting, Saul experienced the Lord's great love and acceptance. He even received a commission to serve as ambassador for the One he had so vehemently opposed. What amazing grace!

God's holiness does indeed set him apart from us, as far as the heavens are above the earth. But thank God, it has not prevented him from reaching down and turning Jacobs into Israels and Sauls into Pauls. Our names may never change, but our internal transformation is guaranteed as we encounter the holiness of God. ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How would you define blasphemy? Give examples of how Christians as well as non-Christians blaspheme God.
2. According to the author, why did God consecrate so many things as holy in the Old Testament?
3. Of all the disciples, John was most intimate with Jesus. In light of that, what is significant about John's reaction to his vision of Jesus in Revelation 1:10-17?
4. Has God's holiness caused you personally to experience the “disintegration factor”? (Page 29)
5. Which of God's attributes do you find most attractive? Most intimidating?
6. What types of behavior might indicate that a Christian has become overly familiar with God?
7. Do you think it's *fair* for God to execute someone?

8. Which spiritual discipline did you pick in Question 4 on this page? How could you develop that discipline?
9. What level of holiness can we expect in this life?
10. Did this chapter's discussion of holiness make you scared of God or secure in him?

RECOMMENDED READING *Holiness* by J.C. Ryle (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1979. Originally published in 1879.)

The Holiness of God by R.C. Sproul (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985)

The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1978)

NOTES

1. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God, Vol. II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979 reprint), p. 112.
2. Henrietta Mears, *What the Bible Is All About* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1983), p. 51.
3. T.C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men* (London, England: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1938).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
5. J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 79.
6. R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), p. 164.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.
8. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1943), p. 38.
9. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1952), p. 138.
10. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God."
11. Sinclair Ferguson, *A Heart for God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1985), p. 130.
12. J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1879, 1985), p. 71.
13. Sinclair Ferguson, *A Heart for God*, p. 129.