

The God of Glory Who Alone Is Holy

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts:
The whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3 ESV).*

WHAT IS A BALANCED VIEW OF GOD?

In my years of preaching, I have met many people who had developed a psychological need to feel chastised or ridiculed in order to feel like they did something religious. A sweet lady in Mississippi once told me, “I don’t feel like I’ve been to church unless I leave with my feet hurting from the preacher stepping all over my toes.” Do you know this phenomenon? The idea is that I go to church to be reminded of how bad I am. I do think there is value in recognizing how bad sin is, how unworthy we are, and how much we need God for any good thing. A healthy appreciation for how limited and sinful we are can shine a light on how sinless and great God is.

But in terms of psychology, surely there is something unhealthy about a deep need to be mentally whipped every Sunday. It can speak to an imbalance and unhealthy story we tell ourselves about God.

James Bryan Smith describes this “dark and negative narrative:”

“...the angry god who judges us harshly, the god who must be prodded and cajoled into forgiving even our minor infractions...There are those who think God is mad all the time, that wrath and anger are essential to God’s nature because God is holy and so much of the world is not. [They say] ‘I just figure that God is generally angry with me, but puts up with it until I do something really bad, and then I wonder, “Oh no, what is God going to do to me?”’ [This] narrative is very common. God, people assume, is mad at all of the sin he sees and is ready to bring the divine hammer down when he gets really fired up.”¹

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), p 115.

But that narrative simply won't do. “This is not the God Jesus knows and loves and proclaims,” writes Smith; “Instead, God's love is not contingent on anything we do. God *is* love. God even loves sinners.”² For God so loved the God-forsaken world, the world full of sin and deserving of annihilation, that he gave his own precious Son. And to what end? So that anyone—any one of these wayward, sinful souls who will just put their trust in Jesus, will not suffer the brunt end of an angry God, but will sit at his table in loving fellowship with goodness and mercy pursuing them forever and ever and ever.

I have seen the fruit that comes with corrective lenses on this.

An elder's wife in Mississippi wrote me a sweet note after my 4 years of ministry there. In that letter, and in a discussion that followed, she said “You taught me to read Bible with love. You helped me see that God is *for* me, not against me. I actually like God, rather than thinking he hates me all the time.” I have heard people trapped in their guilt for 30, 40, or 50 years...set free by a better telling of the story of who God is. And the tears flow down their face as they speak of the sweetness of grace felt—actually *felt*—for the first time.

That is why we are doing this series. A healthy view of God—the God who is crazy about you, with you, and for you—will transform your life and it will change the world.

But we know that unhealthy imbalance can be found on both sides of the truth. There is a ditch on the other side that also needs to be addressed. A woman approached James Smith after one of his sermons to thank you for his sermon. “It was very freeing!” she said. “You see,” she said, “I've been living with my boyfriend for the past six months, and I was raised in a church that said this was a sin, and I felt really guilty. But this morning you said that God loves us without condition, and that Jesus has forgiven all our sins, and then I realized that my guilt was unnecessary. Jesus paid it all! So I just wanted to say thank you for such a liberating message.” Smith writes, “She shook my hand and started to walk away with a bounce in her step, like a woman who has just been told by her doctor that she is cancer-free. My heart sank.”³

I remember a preacher once relating the story of a person who came to his office to seek a divorce. “The bottom line is I'm just not happy with my husband and God wants me to be happy.” He looked at her and said, “What in the world would make you think that?” She stared at him for a minute, unsure what to think. “Ultimate happiness is

² Smith, p. 115.

³ Smith, p. 114.

found in living the will of God, of course,” he continued, “but you are talking about how you feel about your circumstances. By that definition, God is not interested in whether or not you feel happy; he’s much more interested in making you holy.”

What seems all the rage these days is to identify our deepest desires or our basest instincts and then define ourselves by that; make it our goal to feed the beast; to seek the pleasure of whatever our heart desires; after all, we tell ourselves, it would be a sin not to. If turning God into a sadist who enjoys hurting his children is an extreme unhealthy view that needs to be fixed, the other extreme is to turn God into a Santa Claus that only exists to dole out candy and presents and give you limitless freedom to become whatever you wish to become, no matter how bad that is for you, or for the people around you, or for the world He promises to protect and save.

Richard Niebuhr, a long-time professor of ethics in the middle of the last century put it this way: “a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

The same Christian psychologists that tell us viewing God primarily as the Great Executioner will do an unhealthy number on us will also tell you that a life of unlimited permissiveness is more enslaving than anything else. What would we think of a parent who plies their child with chocolates till their so obese that they have diabetes at 8? “Well, he said he wanted it, and I wanted to be a good parent.” Setting rules and boundaries, and enforcing those boundaries, is the sign of a good parent; and the punishment that comes from crossing the boundaries is a sign of protective love. And the willingness to defend the innocent against the oppressor, and to ensure that justice is served is the hallmark of a good and just society.

If God believes in goodness, kindness, generosity, and peace, then he must hate evil, stinginess, mean-spiritedness, oppression, and animosity. You can’t be for something without being against its opposite. A God who could care less about sin, evil, and corruption is no God at all—powerless against darkness—and can never be trusted to mold us into people after His image. How could he be a God who makes righteous judgments if he allows unrighteousness to flourish?

In short, if there is a God—who truly loves us—he must not only be generous and kind; he must also be a consuming fire. In short, he must be a God who is holy.

GETTING CLEAR ON GOD’S WRATH

One minister said that any preacher daring to preach on the holiness of God feels like David wearing armor too big for him.⁴ So very true.

It is not a coincidence that the Spirit of God is called the *Holy* Spirit. And that the Spirit is comparable to a rushing wind, and electric lightening, living water and powerful wine. For the average American my age, the most iconic image of the Holy Spirit comes from Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. You remember the scene. The foolish bad guys dare to toy with the Holy ark of the covenant. The ark that once sat in the Temple of Dagon. And in the morning, the statue of Dagon was face down on the ground before the ark. They put Dagon back up. And the next morning, they find Dagon’s head and hands cut off, with only his legs and trunk still standing.

The ark which rocked on the back of the cart, and Uzzah tried to reach up and steady, and the moment he touches the ark, he is struck dead.

And in this movie, the wrong people acting the wrong way try to rouse the Spirit. They take off the cover of the ark and...you know how it ends. The Spirit of power, wind, lightening, and thunder, the God of power appears and melts their faces off. It’s an image you don’t forget. And you better believe it changes the tone of “there’s an all-seeing eye watching you!”

But you know that movies hardly ever get it right. And the view of God’s holiness as this wild, chaotic, unwieldy threat that shoots out of an uncontrollable venter to kill and maim anyone standing in its wake is not a true and accurate vision. There is context to every one of those stories.

It is true that God’s holiness means he is radically pure and distinct, and that he hates sin and evil. I told you several weeks ago that God’s severity is actually good news, because we wouldn’t want a God who looks at rape, torture, and child abuse and says “no big deal.” No—we want God to hate evil. We want a God who looks at the Holocaust and says, “this terrible wrong will not go unpunished.” Children need security; and as children of God, we know we are safe and secure in Christ because our Father is a *defender* against all evils.

But we can easily develop a lopsided perspective if we think this: any single infraction, however small, is less than perfection and therefore anti-God, and therefore deserving

⁴Tim Keller, “The Holy One.” Sermon preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on April 10, 2011. Available here: <https://podcast.gospelinlife.com/e/the-holy-one/>

of wrath. So God melts our faces off because we are less than perfect, and he’s perfectly justified in doing so. So, watch out!

Is that really what God’s holiness is meant to tell us? No! Here is a big difference between us and God: when we use words like “wrath” to describe ourselves, we are talking about pure rage: irrational, uncontrollable anger that causes us to lash out and who knows what will happen next. We could be overly kind one day (so kind we overlook an offense that really should be judged), and overly enraged the next day (so much so, that we lash out with an extreme reaction in a fit of rage). But that is not our God. Our God is pure love and perfect reason at all times. And love is to “will the good” for someone—even if what is best for them may be difficult for them in the moment. Love is God’s eternal nature. Love is who God *is*. Wrath, on the other hand, is something God *uses* or *does* in dealing with the severity of sin and is always part of God’s reasonable love. So any talk about his severity, his holiness, or his punishment is always, at all times, the right and perfect and reasonable and proportional response that is needed to make us and our world *into what we were always meant to become!* Can I say that again? God is not a “fly off the handle” God who is out to burn your face off. His permanent state of love allows moments of wrath to deal effectively with the depth of sin but is always the just and appropriate response to make us into better people and to bring about a better world. And his wrath burns against sin—not the sinner. He deals harshly with evil, death, and sin, but seeks to deal gently with the human being made in his image who is held captive by evil, death, and sin. Or as Paul puts in 1 Thessalonians 5:9: “For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

You’ve heard this line before: there are lots of people who want Jesus to be their Savior, but not their Lord. But here is the ultimate irony: pardon is useless without *deliverance* from the power that has been keeping us down. Can you imagine if a person serving a lifetime sentence in prison gets a full pardon from the governor. “The state no longer considers you a criminal. It has been removed from your record.” “Oh, thank you!” says the prisoner, “so I guess I’ll go home.” “Oh no,” says the Governor. “I didn’t give you release from prison. I just took it off your record. On paper, it’s as if you were never in prison. It will never show up on any transcript if you go looking for a job. But no, you can’t go home. You are still locked up here indefinitely.”

What is the value of having a pardon if it doesn’t also come with deliverance? And we want—we need—to be delivered from our sins, delivered from darkness, released from captivity to all the things that hurt the image of God in ourselves and in our world. We need God to destroy the works of Satan, hold captivity captive, and finally destroy the final enemy of death. And only a God who is *holy* can do it.

HOLY AS SET APART

Holiness belongs to God from the beginning of the story. The first time we see this word is in the second chapter of Genesis, where God blessed the seventh day and made it “holy” (Gen 2:3). Why? Because God rested from his work on that day, that’s why. The second time we see this word is in the 3rd chapter of Exodus, where Moses stands before a bush on fire, and a voice shakes the earth around him and declares, “do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). Where God dwells is holy. What God does is holy. And who God is is holy. In fact, this is what makes God like no other. For Revelation 15:4 declares, “Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you *alone* are holy.”

That word “alone” helps us get started with a definition of what it means for God to be Holy. For starters, it means he is set apart and distinct from anything else. There is Creator and creation. Everything in heaven and earth and under the earth belongs in the realm of “creation.” And God alone stands as Creator. To help us understand that, God over and over again in his first covenant demanded that his people set things apart. Abraham and Jacob set apart some lambs (Gen 21:28-29; 30:40); Joseph is set apart from his brothers (Gen 49:26). When God blesses and protects land, he sets it apart (Ex 8:22).

And so, God’s people were to set apart the firstborn (Ex 13:12) as dedicated to the Lord. They were set to apart even furniture and pots and pans to create dividing lines between the secular and the sacred. In fact, the setting apart is called “consecrating.” God consecrates the tent of meeting and the altar; he consecrates The line of Aaron to serve as the Levitical priesthood (Ex 29:43-44). And all of this (“don’t wear shirts made of two different kinds of cloth; don’t sow in a field two different kinds of grain”) is to create daily habits so that everywhere you look, you’ll be reminded “there is the ordinary, and there is the extraordinary; there is the normal, and there is the special. Because ultimately—all of these things point to this one reality that each of these daily practices reinforce—that Israel is to set apart the Lord God from all idols, from all ambitions, from all other Gods. “You are to have no other gods before me.” “I alone am God; besides me there is no other.”

To say God is holy, is to say he is set apart. He is like no other.

The year is 1715. The place: Paris, France. And, just as the King had ordered, there are no lights in the entire cathedral except one solitary flickering candle placed over the King’s jewel-studded, solid gold coffin. After all, he’s Louis XIV. Some called him “the Sun King.” He called himself “the Great.” And in his final hour, everyone would stand in awe of the king’s greatness.

The presiding bishop was the court chaplain, Jean-Baptiste Massillon. “I have heard many great orators,” King Louis had once said to him, “and have been highly pleased with them; but whenever I hear you, I go away displeased with myself, for I see my own character.” Foreboding words.

When Bishop Massillon rose to give his funeral oration, he surprised the crowd: he slowly reached down and, with his finger, snuffed the candle out. And, with a steady voice, loudly proclaimed, “Only God is great.”⁵

How great is he? He is so great, “the highest heavens cannot contain Him.” Where does He live and how long has he lived there? Isaiah says our God “inhabits eternity” (Isa 57:15). What a chilling phrase! God is not “the biggest, oldest thing at the end of some cosmic chain.” We know that. Our God is “wholly other;” not the biggest Being—but the very source of all Being. What Augustine called “Being itself.” But I can’t understand that. I need a mental image. So, if Isaiah came to West Side he would say, “when the Lord, the high and lofty one, sits on His throne, the hem of his robe fills this auditorium” (Isaiah 6:1). Meanwhile, Isaiah says, picture winged creatures flying all around, and singing to one another, welling up into a chorus:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
The *whole earth* is full of his glory.” (Isaiah 6:1-3)

He fills all time and all space, and even more than that, because time and space are in His hand as well! Everything is on the “creation” side, except Him alone, who stands as Creator. Isaiah says, “you can’t compare my God to anyone or anything!” (Isa 40:18). He’s the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God” (1 Tim 1:17). Or, as Paul puts it in Romans, “For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

HOLY AS WORTHY OF GLORY ALONE

Have you noticed in Scripture how “holy” and “glory” seem to go together?

God told Moses to make holy garments for Aaron, “for beauty and for glory” (Ex 28:2). Several times in the Old Testament, God’s people were told to “glory in his holy name” (Ps 105:3; cf. 1 Chron 16:10; Isaiah 41:16), or to give thanks to his “holy” name and “glory” in his praise (1 Chron 16:35). The dying Stephen was full of the “Holy” Spirit,

⁵ Taken from two renditions: (1) Steven Lawson, *Psalms 1-75*, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2004), p. 49; (2) <http://massillonchurches.com/JBMassillon.phtml>

when he looked up and saw the “glory” of God (Acts 7:55). And Jesus will return in the “glory” of his Father with the “holy” angels (Mark 8:38; Lk 9:26). Remember Revelation? “Who will glorify your name? For you *alone* are holy” (Rev 15:4).

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.

We know this! Everybody agrees that God alone is worthy of our glory. Nothing in all creation shares space with God. I mean, how could anyone doubt it? I don’t know... but we do.

Romans 1 says the basic sin of humanity is that we simply won’t give him ALL the glory. We like our crowns, and we glory in ourselves. Every one of us—say Paul in Romans 3—are guilty of “glory theft.” Our forefathers created gods out of rocks and trees, but we are not much different: we find our gods in the mirror.

Stand with me in front of that mirror, will you, and let the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman, spoken over 200 years ago, cut us open and expose our hearts:

Quote: “We don’t make it our aim to please God. We make it our aim to please ourselves without displeasing God.”⁶ Let me say that again. “We don’t make it our aim to please God. We make it our aim to please ourselves without displeasing God.” What difference does that make? All the difference in the world. What we aim for...is what we worship.

Oh, we may want God to smile when he looks at us 100% of the time. But deep down, we want him to be pleased with our plans, approve of our wishes, and back our will. We want him to bless our desires, rather than desiring what He blesses. In short, we want God to glory in our wishes. And it’s glory theft!

And it’s so easy! It’s glory theft every time we take a story about God and try to turn it into a story about me.

Like Peter. In Mark 6, Jesus walks on the water. He acts like God and talks like God. The entire story is meant to reveal the glory of God. Just look at the heading in your Bible: “Jesus walks on the water.” But Matthew tells a different story. As Jesus begins to walk on the water, Peter says, “look what I can do!” and jumps out of the boat. He attempts to turn a story about God into a story about himself. And it works. Just look

⁶ Adapted from John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Sermon #2: Obedience without love.”
<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/parochial/volume4/sermon2.html>

at the header in your Bible: “Peter walks on the water!” Please me. I hope that doesn’t displease you.

Like James and John. Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer and die, but will one day return in his glory AND the glory of His Father, with the holy angels. Cue James and John: “Hey, when you come in YOUR glory, will you put me and my brother in the top spots—on your right and left hand?” Please me. I hope that doesn’t displease you.

The bumper stickers have it wrong: God is not my co-pilot. He isn’t a Santa clause who only exists to give you whatever you want. Think higher things of God than calling him your buddy or pal. Long before “he’s a friend, he’s a friend next to ya,” he is the exalted Lord over all creation, seated on a throne far above all rule and authority and power and dominion (Eph 1:21). “Glory to God alone” is a charge against being flippant with our language or being all too casual in the presence of Almighty God.

Here's a mental image you can take to the bank: Revelation tells us that when anything and everything in heaven and earth and under the earth catches one glimpse of the glory of God, their faces hit the ground...and the crowns come off.

Our God inhabits eternity, including *this* time, and *this* space. We stand before Almighty God. This is holy ground. And His train fills this auditorium. God’s holiness speaks to God’s incomparable transcendent perfection that makes him the Lord, and we his servants. He allows no rivals. He has no equals. And he demands total and complete surrender.

In that light, may I encourage you to snuff...your...candle...out. As God proclaims in Isaiah 42:8, “I am the Lord; that is my name. My glory I give to no other.”

And for those who refuse to snuff their candle out...those who persist on having other Gods, especially themselves, here the words of the loving Jesus Christ, the express image of God: “those who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have [persisted in] evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28). “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath” (John 3:36). “For the Son of Man is to come with his angles in the glory of his Father, and then he will replay everyone for what has been done” (Matthew 16:27).

HOLY AS TRANSLATABLE: HAVING A SHARE IN GOD’S GLORY

But God isn’t finished with the story. I told you that one part of our definition of Holy is separate, distinct, set apart, and like no other. But if that was all there was to God’s holiness, how could he ever be our Savior? Into the world he came. Into the sin-drenched, unholy, God-forsaken world he came. And to us—you and I—so far from perfect, so often so much less than we ought to be—He fills with his Spirit and says “I want to live with you. I want to smile with and cry with you. I’m taking up residence here. Somehow we’ve got to see our high and holy God as the one who stands above it all, but can also get his hands dirty as he sits at table with tax collectors and preachers.

And that’s where Isaiah dazzles us again. “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy,” writes Isaiah in chapter 57, verse 15; “I dwell in the high and holy place” says the Lord; “but also—but also—I dwell with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.”

Is God so high and lofty that his glory is inaccessible? So unreachable that it can have no affect? Is God so distant that we can’t be changed as our hearts melt when he comes walking by us and says “I’m going to your house today?”

It’s as if he says “I am the Lord, the Holy high and lofty—and I will not share my glory. But I am the Lord, the giver of Life, who lives in your heart—and I will give you a share IN my glory.

The angels were keeping watch over their filed by night when the heavenly hosts in the multitudes appeared, and the glory of the Lord shone all around them. The glory that belongs to God in the heavens was coming to earth. And God came down in the person of Jesus Christ, and, as John says, “we beheld his glory” as he served as the very reflection of God (Jn 1:14; Heb 1:3). And he poured out His spirit. Not just any Spirit. The spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, who now lives in you. And what spirit is that, you ask? 1 Peter 4:14 says, “the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God.”

And he put you and me in this loving community called the church. And Paul says “now to him who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine. To him be glory...in the church.” And that’s why Paul says in Romans 5, “we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (Rom 5:2). Or, to put it another way, Hebrews 12 says that “we might share in his Holiness” (Heb 12:10).

When Paul tells husbands to love their wives, he says you should love your wives like Christ loved the church. How did he do that? Well, he gave himself up for her. And

why did he sacrifice his own life and put the church before his own self? Here is his answer: He died “to make her holy.” When Paul writes to what Devin Swindle calls “the hot mess Church of Christ in Corinth,” you can’t find a more mixed up church in the New Testament times. If there was a problem, Corinth had it. And yet, Paul writes to that church and doesn’t get two verses into the book without calling them “sanctified”—that means, “God’s holy people.”

Just as Jesus in the gospels says even though I have power, what makes me the Messiah is my willingness to give up my power so God can be all in all, Paul says even though God is separate, high and lofty which is one definition of holy, what makes God holy in the fullest sense is his ability to be pure and righteous in the midst of a troubled world and to share his purity and righteousness with troubled humanity and to do it all in purity. He is able to judge sin righteously and die in our place so that he can be both just and the justifier. And when the angels hear about this, they can’t stop singing: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty. Because the unimaginable has happened; the high and lofty one has entered into humanity and now shares his glory. In fact, the whole earth is full of your glory.”

Because God is generous kind and loving, I desire to praise him. But because he is holy, he is worthy of our praising him. And it turns out, his holiness that burns like fire, destroying all that is against God, can melt my heart of stone, removing the dross, and allow me to be born anew pure and righteous in his eyes.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.