

THE
HOLINESS
OF
GOD

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RC SPROUL



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C H A P T E R

ONE



The Holy Grail

Gaily bedight, a gallant knight
In sunshine and in shadow;
Riding along, singing a song,
In search of El Dorado.

EDGAR ALLEN POE

I was compelled to leave the room. A deep, undeniable summons disturbed my sleep; something holy called me. The only sound was the rhythmic ticking of the clock on my desk. It seemed vague and unreal, as if it were in a chamber, submerged under fathoms of water. I had reached the beginning edge of slumber, where the line between consciousness and unconsciousness is blurred. I was suspended in that moment when one hangs precariously on the edge, a moment when sounds from the outside world still intrude on the quietness of one's brain, that moment just before surrender to the night occurs. Asleep, but not yet asleep. Awake, but not alert. Still vulnerable to the inner summons that said, "Get up. Get out of this room."

The summons became stronger, more urgent, impossible to ignore. A burst of wakefulness made me jerk upright and swing my legs over the side of the bed and onto the floor. Sleep vanished in an instant, and my body sprang into resolute action. Within seconds I was dressed and on the way out of my college dormitory. A quick glance at the clock registered the time in my mind. Ten minutes before midnight.

The night air was cold, turning the snow of the morning to a hard-crusting blanket. I felt the crunch under my feet as I walked toward the center of campus. The moon cast a ghostly pall on the

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college buildings, whose gutters were adorned with giant icicles—dripping water arrested in space, solid daggers of ice that resembled frozen fangs. No human architect could design these gargoyles of nature.

The gears of the clock atop Old Main Tower began to grind, and the arms met and embraced vertically. I heard the dull groan of the machinery a split second before the chimes began to ring. Four musical tones signaled the full hour. They were followed by the steady, sonorous striking of twelve. I counted them in my mind, as I always did, checking for a possible error in their number. But they never missed. Exactly twelve strokes pealed from the tower like an angry judge's gavel banging on metal.

The chapel was in the shadow of Old Main Tower. The door was made of heavy oak with a Gothic arch. I swung it open and entered the narthex. The door fell shut behind me with a clanging sound that reverberated from the stone walls of the nave.

The echo startled me. It was a strange contrast to the sounds of daily chapel services, where the opening and closing of the doors were muffled by the sounds of students shuffling to their assigned places. Now the sound of the door was amplified into the void of midnight.

I waited for a moment in the narthex, allowing my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. The faint glow of the moon seeped through the muted stained-glass windows. I could make out the outline of the pews and the center aisle that led to the chancel steps. I felt a majestic sense of space, accented by the vaulted arches of the ceiling. They seemed to draw my soul upward, a sense of height that evoked a feeling of a giant hand reaching down to pick me up.

I moved slowly and deliberately toward the chancel steps. The sound of my shoes against the stone floor evoked terror-filled images of German soldiers marching in hobnailed boots along cob-

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blestone streets. Each step resounded down the center aisle as I reached the carpet-covered chancel.

There I sank to my knees. I had reached my destination. I was ready to meet the source of the summons that had disturbed my rest.

I was in a posture of prayer, but I had nothing to say. I knelt there quietly, allowing the sense of the presence of a holy God to fill me. The beat of my heart was telltale, a *thump-thump* against my chest. An icy chill started at the base of my spine and crept up my neck. Fear swept over me. I fought the impulse to run from the foreboding presence that gripped me.

The terror passed, but soon it was followed by another wave. This wave was different. It flooded my soul with unspeakable peace, a peace that brought instant rest and repose to my troubled spirit. At once I was comfortable. I wanted to linger there. To say nothing. To do nothing. Simply to bask in the presence of God.

That moment was life transforming. Something deep in my spirit was being settled once for all. From this moment there could be no turning back; there could be no erasure of the indelible imprint of its power. I was alone with God. A holy God. An awesome God. A God who could fill me with terror in one second and with peace in the next. I knew in that hour that I had tasted of the Holy Grail. Within me was born a new thirst that could never be fully satisfied in this world. I resolved to learn more, to pursue this God who lived in dark Gothic cathedrals and who invaded my dormitory room to rouse me from complacent slumber.

What makes a college student seek the presence of God in the late hours? Something happened in a classroom that afternoon that drove me to the chapel. I was a new Christian. My conversion had been sudden and dramatic, a replica for me of the Damascus Road. My life had been turned upside down, and I was filled with zeal for the sweetness of Christ. I was consumed with a new passion. To

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study Scripture. To learn how to pray. To conquer the vices that assaulted my character. To grow in grace. I wanted desperately to make my life count for Christ. My soul was singing, “Lord, I want to be a Christian.”

But something was missing in my early Christian life. I had abundant zeal, but it was marked by a shallowness, a kind of simplicity that was making me a one-dimensional person. I was a Unitarian of sorts, a Unitarian of the second person of the Trinity. I knew who Jesus was, but God the Father was shrouded in mystery. He was hidden, an enigma to my mind and a stranger to my soul. A dark veil covered His face.

My philosophy class changed that.

It was a course that had held little interest for me. I could hardly wait to get the tedious requirement behind me. I had chosen to major in Bible and thought the abstract speculations that went on in philosophy class were a waste of time. Listening to philosophers quarrel about reason and doubt seemed empty. I found no food for my soul, nothing to inflame my imagination, just dull and difficult intellectual puzzles that left me cold. Until that winter afternoon.

The lecture that day was about a Christian philosopher whose name was Aurelius Augustine. In the course of history, he had been canonized by the Roman Catholic church. Everyone spoke of him as Saint Augustine. The professor lectured on Augustine’s views of the creation of the world.

I was familiar with the biblical account of creation. I knew that the Old Testament opens with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” But I had never thought deeply about the original act of creation. Augustine probed into this glorious mystery and raised the question, “How was it done?”

“In the beginning . . .”

It sounds like the start of a fairy tale: “Once upon a time.” The trouble is that in the beginning there was no time as we understand it to be “once upon.” We think of beginnings as starting points

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somewhere in the middle of a period of history. Cinderella had a mother and a grandmother. Her story that began “once upon a time” did not begin at the absolute beginning. Before Cinderella there were kings and queens, rocks and trees, horses, jackrabbits, daffodils.

What was there before the beginning of Genesis 1? The people God created had no parents or grandparents. They had no history books to read because there was no history. Before the creation there were no kings or queens or rocks or trees. There was nothing; nothing, of course, except God.

Here is where I got an Excedrin headache in my philosophy class. Before the world began, there was nothing. But what in the world is “nothing”? Have you ever tried to think about nothing? Where can we find it? Obviously nowhere. Why? Because it is nothing, and nothing doesn’t exist. It can’t exist, because if it did, then it would be something and not nothing. Are you starting to get a headache like mine? Think about it for a second. I can’t tell you to think about “it” because nothing isn’t an “it.” I can only say “nothing isn’t.”

So how can we think about nothing? We can’t. It is simply impossible. If we try to think of nothing, we always wind up thinking of something. As soon as I try to think about nothing, I start imagining a lot of “empty” air. But air is something. It has weight and substance. I know that because of what happens if a nail goes through the tire of my car.

Jonathan Edwards once said that nothing is what sleeping rocks dream about. That doesn’t help much. My son offered me a better definition of *nothing*. When he was in junior high, I asked him when he came home from school, “What did you do today, Son?” The reply was the same every day: “Nuthin’.” So the best explanation I can give of “nothing” is “that which my son used to do every day in junior high.”

Our understanding of creativity involves the shaping and form-

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ing of paint, clay, notes on paper, or some other substance. In our experience we have not been able to find a painter who paints without paint or a writer who writes without words or a composer who composes without notes. Artists must start with *something*. What artists do is shape, form, or rearrange other materials. But they never work with nothing.

Saint Augustine taught that God created the world out of nothing. Creation was something like the magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Except God didn't have a rabbit, and He didn't even have a hat.

My next-door neighbor is a skilled cabinetmaker. One of his specialties is constructing cabinets for professional magicians. He has given me a tour of his workshop and has shown me how the magician's boxes and cabinets are made. The trick is the clever use of mirrors. When the magician walks onstage and displays an empty box or an empty hat, what you see is only half the box or half the hat. Take the "empty" hat, for example. A mirror is fixed in the exact middle of the hat. The mirror reflects the empty side of the hat, giving an exact mirror image. The illusion creates the visual effect of seeing both sides of an empty hat. In fact you see only half the hat. The other half has plenty of room to conceal snow-white doves or a plump rabbit. Not much magic to it, is there?

God did not create the world with mirrors. To do that He would have required half a world to start with and a giant mirror to conceal the other half. Creation involved the bringing into existence of everything that is, including mirrors. God created the world from nothing. Once there was nothing, then suddenly, by the command of God, there was a universe.

Again we ask, How did He do it? The only hint the Bible gives is that God called the universe into being. Augustine called that act the "divine imperative" or the "divine fiat." We all know that an imperative is a command. So is a fiat. When Augustine spoke of a

fiat, he was not thinking of a little Italian car. The dictionary defines *fiat* as a command or an act of the will that creates something.

At the present moment I am writing this book on a computer manufactured by IBM. It is an amazing piece of machinery, quite complicated in all its parts. The machine is designed to respond to certain commands. If I make a mistake while I am typing on the keyboard, I do not have to reach for an eraser. To correct my errors, I merely punch in a command, and the computer corrects it. The computer works by fiat. But the power of my fiat is limited. The only fiats that work are the ones that are already programmed into the computer. I would love simply to be able to say to the computer, "Write this whole book for me, please, while I go out and play golf." My machine can't do that. I can yell at the screen with the strongest imperative I know: "Write that book!" but the thing is too obstinate to comply.

God's fiats are not so limited. He can create by the sheer force of His divine command. He can bring something out of nothing, life out of death. He can do these things by the sound of His voice.

The first sound uttered in the universe was the voice of God commanding, "Let there be!" It is improper to say that this was the first sound "in" the universe because until the sound was made there was no universe for it to be in. God shouted into a void. Perhaps it was a kind of primal scream directed at the empty darkness.

The command created its own molecules to carry the sound waves of God's voice farther and farther into space. Yet sound waves would take too long. The speed of this imperative exceeded the speed of light. As soon as the words left the Creator's mouth, things began to happen. Where His voice reverberated, stars appeared, glowing in unspeakable brilliance in tempo with the songs of angels. The force of divine energy splattered against the sky like a kaleidoscope of color hurled from the palette of a powerful artist. Comets crisscrossed the sky with flashing tails like Fourth of July skyrockets.

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The act of creation was the first event in history. It was also the most dazzling. The Supreme Architect gazed at His complex blueprint and shouted commands for the boundaries of the world to be set. He spoke, and the seas were shut behind doors, and the clouds were filled with dew. He bound the Pleiades and buckled the belt of Orion. He spoke again, and the earth began to fill with orchards in full bloom. Blossoms burst forth like springtime in Mississippi. The lavender hues of plum trees danced with the brilliance of azaleas and forsythia.

God spoke once more, and the waters teemed with living things. The snail sneaked beneath the shadowy form of the stingray, while the great marlin broke the surface of the water to promenade on the waves with his tail. Again He spoke, and the roar of the lion and the bleating of sheep were heard. Four-footed animals, eight-legged spiders, and winged insects appeared.

And God said, "That's good."

Then God stooped to earth and carefully fashioned a piece of clay. He lifted it gently to His lips and breathed into it. The clay began to move. It began to think. It began to feel. It began to worship. It was alive and stamped with the image of its Creator.

Consider the raising of Lazarus from the dead. How did Jesus do it? He did not enter the tomb where the rotting corpse of Lazarus was laid out; he did not have to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He stood outside the tomb, at a distance, and cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" Blood began to flow through the veins of Lazarus, and brain waves started to pulsate. In a burst of life Lazarus quit his grave and walked out. That is fiat creation, the power of the divine imperative.

Some modern theorists believe that the world was created by nothing. Note the difference between saying that the world was created *from* nothing and saying that the universe was created *by* nothing. In this modern view the rabbit comes out of the hat without a rabbit, a hat, or even a magician. The modern view is far more

miraculous than the biblical view. It suggests that nothing created something. More than that, it holds that nothing created everything—quite a feat indeed!

Now surely there aren't serious people running around in this scientific age claiming that the universe was created by nothing, are there? Yes. Scores of them. To be sure, they usually don't say it quite the way I have said it, and they'd probably be annoyed with me for stating their views in such a manner. They'd undoubtedly protest that I have given a distorted caricature of their sophisticated position. OK. True—they don't say that the universe was created by nothing; they say that the universe was created by chance.

But chance is no thing. It has no weight, no measurements, no power. It is merely a word we use to describe mathematical possibilities. It can do nothing. It can do nothing because it is nothing. To say that the universe was created by chance is to say that it came from nothing.

That is intellectual madness. What are the chances that the universe was created by chance?

Saint Augustine understood that the world could not be created by chance. He knew that it required something or someone with power—the very power of creation—to get the job done. He knew that something cannot come from nothing. He understood that somewhere, somehow, something or someone had to have the power of being. If not, then nothing would now exist.

The Bible says, “In the beginning God.” The God we worship is the God who has always been. He alone can create beings, because He alone has the *power of being*. He is not nothing. He is not chance. He is pure Being, the One who has the power to be *all by Himself*. He alone is eternal. He alone has power over death. He alone can call worlds into being by fiat, by the power of His command. Such power is staggering, awesome. It is deserving of respect, of humble adoration.

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It was the words of Augustine—that God created the world out of nothing by the sheer power of His voice—that drove me to the chapel at midnight.

I know what it means to be converted. I know what it means to be born again. I also understand that a person can be born again only once. When the Holy Spirit quickens our souls to new life in Christ, He does not stop His work. He continues to work on us. He continues to change us.

My experience in the classroom, thinking about the creation of the world, was like being born again a second time. It was like being converted, not merely to God the Son, but to God the Father. Suddenly I had a passion to know God the Father. I wanted to know Him in His majesty, to know Him in His power, to know Him in His august holiness.

My “conversion” to God the Father was not without its attending difficulties. Though I was deeply impressed by the notion of a God who created a whole universe from nothing, I was troubled by the fact that the world we live in is a place filled with sorrows. It is a world riddled with evil. My next question was, How could a good and holy God create a world that is in such a mess? As I studied the Old Testament, I was also bothered by the stories about God’s ordering the slaughter of women and children, of God’s killing Uzzah instantly for touching the ark of the covenant, and by other narratives that seemed to reveal a brutal side to the character of God. How could I ever come to love such a God?

The one concept, the central idea I kept meeting in Scripture, was the idea that God is *holy*. The word was foreign to me. I wasn’t sure what it meant. I made the question a matter of diligent and persistent search. Today I am still absorbed with the question of the holiness of God. I am convinced that it is one of the most important ideas that a Christian can ever grapple with. It is basic to our whole understanding of God and of Christianity.

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The idea of holiness is so central to biblical teaching that it is said of God, “Holy is his name” (Luke 1:49). His name is holy because He is holy. He is not always treated with holy reverence. His name is tramped through the dirt of this world. It functions as a curse word, a platform for the obscene. That the world has little respect for God is vividly seen by the way the world regards His name. No honor. No reverence. No awe before Him.

If I were to ask a group of Christians what the top priority of the church is, I am sure I would get a wide variety of answers. Some would say evangelism, others social action, and still others spiritual nurture. But I have yet to hear anyone talk about what Jesus’ priorities were.

What is the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer? Jesus said, “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven . . .’” (Matt. 6:9). The first line of the prayer is not a petition. It is a form of personal address. The prayer continues: “hallowed be your name, your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:9-10). We often confuse the words “hallowed be your name” with part of the address, as if the words were “hallowed *is* your name.” In that case the words would merely be an ascription of praise to God. But that is not how Jesus said it. He uttered it as a petition, as the first petition. We should be praying that God’s name be hallowed, that God be regarded as holy.

There is a kind of sequence within the prayer. God’s kingdom will never come where His name is not considered holy. His will is not done on earth as it is in heaven if His name is desecrated here. In heaven the name of God is holy. It is breathed by angels in a sacred hush. Heaven is a place where reverence for God is total. It is foolish to look for the kingdom anywhere God is not revered.

How we understand the person and character of God the Father affects every aspect of our lives. It affects far more than what we normally call the “religious” aspects of our lives. If God is the Creator of the entire universe, then it must follow that He is the Lord of the whole universe. No part of the world is outside of His lordship.

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That means that no part of my life must be outside of His lordship. His holy character has something to say about economics, politics, athletics, romance—everything with which we are involved.

God is inescapable. There is no place we can hide from Him. Not only does He penetrate every aspect of our lives, but He penetrates it in his majestic holiness. Therefore we must seek to understand what the holy is. We dare not seek to avoid it. There can be no worship, no spiritual growth, no true obedience without it. It defines our goal as Christians. God has declared, “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44).

To reach that goal, we must understand what holiness is.

Allowing God’s Holiness to Touch Our Lives

As you reflect about what you have learned and rediscovered about God’s holiness, answer these questions. Use a journal to record your responses to God’s holiness, or discuss your responses with a friend.

1. When you think of God as holy, what comes to your mind?
2. Describe a time when you were overcome by God’s holiness.
3. Are you attracted to God’s holiness?
4. What does it mean for you to be holy in the coming week?