


'HOLINESS' MAY SEEM A LONG WAY OFF.
BUT GOD HAS A PLAN FOR GETTING YOU THERE.

A SINNER'S GUIDE TO HOLINESS

A person in a light-colored jacket and pants is walking away from the viewer on the crest of a large sand dune. The dunes are golden-brown and have ripples in the sand. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

JOHN CHAPMAN

Holiness. What is it? Why do I need it? And why is it such a struggle for me to achieve holiness in my everyday life?

John Chapman explores what the Bible has to say about holiness—where it begins, how it makes progress in our lives, and its ultimate fulfilment as we are changed into Christ's glorious likeness on the Last Day.

Read this book and rediscover the joy of being a sinner on the path of holiness.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Chapman was a well-known evangelist and Bible teacher, and wrote the best-selling *A Fresh Start* and *Know and Tell the Gospel*. For 25 years, he directed the Anglican Department of Evangelism in Sydney. He was a passionate and articulate preacher of Christ crucified until he went home to be with his Lord in 2012.



**A SINNER'S
GUIDE TO
HOLINESS**

Other works by John Chapman:

A Foot in Two Worlds

A Fresh Start

Know and Tell the Gospel

Making the Most of the Bible

Making the Most of the Cross

Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life

Setting Hearts on Fire

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A Sinner's Guide to Holiness

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CONTENTS

1. Holiness: Where it begins	11
2. Holiness: How it progresses	35
3. Holiness: Its fulfilment	55
4. Holiness: One sinner's testimony— the first 60 years are the hardest!	73
Appendix: Discussion guide	85

Chapter 1

HOLINESS

Where it begins

I SUPPOSE IF YOU ARE anything like me your attitude to holiness goes something like this: “Oh God, make me holy, but not too holy and not too soon.”

Lurking deep down inside each of us is the thought that if we were to be made holy, in the way that God is holy, then there could well be some things we very much want for ourselves from which we would be excluded. We would miss out on something good that we could otherwise have. We fear that God may call on us to do something we will hate. We suspect, half-unconsciously, that God may not have our best interests at heart after all. He may interrupt our quest for money, or for popularity, or for success, to our great loss and disadvantage.

This thinking, although natural, is of course wrong,

and it is one basic reason why there is such an urgent need for us to consider the subject of holiness. One major purpose of writing this book is simply to remind us again that “no good thing does [the LORD] withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps 84:11). To be holy—that is, to be like God in character—is to live the ‘good life’.¹ If we desire to live that good life, then our understanding of this subject should not be considered an optional extra. We should read on. Even more importantly, we should pray for understanding of holiness and pray that God will indeed cause us to be holy.

What is holiness?

What then is holiness? Holiness is a term that is regularly used not of people but of God. He is often referred to as “the Holy One of Israel”.² The idea behind such a title is that God is entirely other, distinct and separate from everything he has made.

When the word ‘holiness’ is used in connection with God, it’s a bit like an expanding suitcase. The more you know about him, the bigger the concept of holiness becomes—and the more meaning you discover is

1 John 10:10

2 This reference occurs mainly in the Psalms and Isaiah. See, for example, Psalm 71:22, 78:41 and 89:18, and Isaiah 1:4, 5:19 and 24, 10:20, 12:6, 17:7, 29:19, 30:11, 12 and 15, 31:1, etc.

packed into this one word ‘holiness’. Because God is great, speaking of his holiness is to open up a massive subject where we will discover that we see in part rather than in whole. This should not put us off, however. If we really reached the point where we thought we’d comprehended everything there is to know about God, there is also a very good chance that we would be getting it wrong.

I want to consider two essential characteristics of God’s holiness. I want to consider, firstly, God’s holiness as power and might. Secondly, I want to consider God’s holiness in terms of his perfect purity.

Holiness as power and might

God is holy—separate, distinct, and other—in his power and in his might. He is not the same as us. We must realize from the outset that he is different; and different in that he is far greater and more powerful than either we could be or we could even hope to grasp hold of.

This difference or separateness—this *holiness*—is well illustrated in the book of Job. The book of Job is named after its principal character, and, except for a bit at the beginning and a bit at the end, it is simply a long poem. It opens with a good man who, as well as being good, is also healthy, wealthy and wise. He has a large family, and his many children are a source of great delight to their father. Into the bargain we may add that Job is godly—something that the writer of Job is at pains

to insist on from the very beginning.³

However, in one fell swoop the wheels completely fall off Job's semitrailer. Job's property is plundered and stolen. His houses burn down. All his children are killed in an accident. His health fails. He himself becomes so sick and so badly disfigured that when his three friends visit him they can hardly recognize that it is Job.

Job's three friends are so distressed at the sight they see, that after a period of silence (which is their most helpful contribution) they feel obligated to make some theological reflections on his condition and position. They sum up the situation, and suggest to Job that his present troubles must be because of God's judgement on him for something very sinful that he has done. Job immediately protests that he isn't any more sinful than they are. They all feel the need to speak, however, and their message is fairly uniform. They speak one at a time and Job answers them each time. So while they only have to speak once, he has to answer three times. It is a long and tedious process he has to go through, as he hears the same arguments again and again from three slightly different, but essentially identical, perspectives.

Because all three friends take the same wrong-headed line, by the end of the conversations Job has been almost driven to distraction. His suffering has been greatly compounded. He knows that what they are

3 Indeed, the point about Job's righteousness is made by God himself in Job 1:8.

saying is totally incorrect; he sees that their theological understanding of the situation is simplistic, and that it has completely missed the mark. The three friends put us in mind of the saying that for every complex problem there is a simple solution—a solution that is almost certainly wrong.

I almost forgot to tell you that when all three friends have finally worn themselves out, yet another friend comes and sticks his oar into the discussion. He adds nothing new, but manages to intensify Job's suffering by underlining and repeating what all the others have already said.

In chapter 23 of the book, we read as follows:

Then Job answered and said:

“Today also my complaint is bitter;
my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would know what he would answer me
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of
his power?
No; he would pay attention to me.
There an upright man could argue with him,
and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.”
(Job 23:1-7)

Here, Job seems to be very close to blasphemy. “If I could find God, I would have it out with him” is what he is saying. It is almost as if he views himself as God’s equal.

This seems to me to be the inevitable result of Job accepting, at least in part, the wrong theology he is being told by his friends. Wrong theology always results in wrong behaviour. It is one reason why we should not despise the study of theology, as if it doesn’t matter what we believe. It is also a very good reason why we should pray regularly for those who teach us about God, and why we should study the Bible for ourselves with great diligence and care.

The book of Job continues for quite a few more chapters. Job’s friends persist with their simplistic line of theology, and Job continues stubbornly to respond that he is completely innocent of any wrongdoing.

Eventually, and after all have said their piece to the point of exhaustion, God appears to Job.

When reading the book of Job for the first time I remember thinking, “Surely, now that God has appeared, he will be able to say that Job was right all along, and that his friends were in the wrong”. It seems only right and fair, given what Job has suffered. But if this seems the obvious response on God’s part, we are in for a great surprise. God’s response doesn’t follow the expected pattern at all. It appears, indeed, that there is a far more important matter that needs immediate attention, and God has appeared in order to address it.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said:

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words
without knowledge?
Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known
to me. (Job 38:2-3)

I must say that to have God speak to me in this way would have made me feel extremely apprehensive. When I am told to ‘brace myself like a man’, I never imagine that what is about to happen will be a relaxing or pleasant experience. And indeed, God’s cross-examination of Job is very ‘heavy roller’ treatment. God begins by asking Job if he was present with him, helping him, when he created the cosmos.

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of
the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

“Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb,
when I made clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

and prescribed limits for it
and set bars and doors,
and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stayed?"

"Have you commanded the morning since your days
began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?
It is changed like clay under the seal,
and its features stand out like a garment.
From the wicked their light is withheld,
and their uplifted arm is broken." (Job 38:4-15)

"Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades
or loose the cords of Orion?
Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,
or can you guide the Bear with its children?
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?"

"Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
that a flood of waters may cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go
and say to you, 'Here we are'?
Who has put wisdom in the inward parts
or given understanding to the mind?
Who can number the clouds by wisdom?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods stick fast together?" (Job 38:31-38)

It is a long speech; the longest in the book so far, and it is not over yet. God continues in this way for the rest of this and the following two chapters. It is totally and utterly overwhelming.

Listen then to how Job reacts to these words of God. This time, we are not at all surprised to find that the Job who speaks is a very different man from the one who first demanded that God would appear and give him justice.

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.’
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:1-6)

As Job is presented with the greatness and awe of God’s majesty, he says something not too far different from, “I am little, and you are big. Little people shouldn’t tell big people where to get off”. That is, he has said what he should not have said, and he now humbly repents of stepping over this line.

One thing noticeably absent from God’s speech is this: Job receives no immediate answer to the question

‘Why?’ The reason for his suffering is not given. He does not even learn at this point whether he or his friends were right in their assessment of his condition and its causes. Rather, his question fades into the background, lost and forgotten in the face of the *otherness* of God, his holiness, greatness, and power.

Because of this, we must conclude that Job’s ‘repentance’ is not because of some moral sin, obvious or hidden. He repents not for some specific wrong thing that he has done in the past, but because he has failed to treat God as he deserves. In his speech-making, he had made his demands as if he and God were almost equals. Now he is reminded, and has come to terms with the reality, that he is not able to demand God’s action. God is God, and Job is not. Job is to relate to God as God really is, not as an equal. Job is to relate to God in full recognition that God is infinitely greater than Job in power, might and holiness.

This in turn demonstrates a very important aspect of our response to the holiness of God.

During the course of my ministry I have met unbelievers who say to me, “I would become a follower of Jesus provided that he would do such and such”; or “I would start believing in God if only he would fulfil this condition or provide this or that proof”. This thinking is both foolish and wrong-headed. It demonstrates that the one speaking has simply not come to terms with God’s holiness. The fact of the matter is that God is God and we are not. We are his creatures, nothing more. We are not the Creator, and we have no right to impose any

terms or conditions upon him or upon the nature of his existence, or upon the way he must behave towards us.

It is part of the extraordinary blindness of humans that we persist in believing the lie—first perpetrated in the Garden of Eden—that if we disobey God we can then go on to be his equals.⁴ We argue with God; we choose to revise his words and his will whenever these things don't coincide with our wishes. We know the reality is that we are part of God's creation and not ourselves the Creator. Yet we still persist in thinking we are God's equals. This is both stupid and irrational.

This wrong and foolish attitude needs to be repented of, if ever we are to relate to God as we ought.

Holiness as purity

We turn now to consider a second aspect of God's holiness, and that is his moral purity.

God is without sin; evil forms no part of his character. This truth about God's holiness is well described by the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk, chapter 1, says:

You who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and are silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he? (Hab 1:13)

4 Genesis 3:5