

Seeking the Sacred

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This book is dedicated to James Chason and
Sandi Williams, fellow laborers in the Lord, who both
invested a great deal of their own time and energy into
refining this most important message.

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Introduction

My son, if you will receive my words and treasure my commandments within you, make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:1-5

I would like to begin with a profound and intriguing fact: whoever you are, whatever your age, and regardless of your beliefs, God is looking straight into your heart even as you read this sentence.

You cannot make Him leave. You cannot elude Him; you cannot hide from Him. His presence is everywhere all at once; there are no boundaries or circumstances that can prevent Him from seeing you. It is not a difficult thing for the omniscient and omnipotent God of heaven to encounter you and every person on this planet in this way. His ability is not limited to yours—that is why you *need* Him so much.

God is fully aware of who you are, how you conduct yourself, even what you are thinking. Nothing escapes His attention. There is nothing about you that He does not know, whether or not you choose to believe in *Him*. He knows your good deeds as well as your failures and shortcomings. He knows your good intentions as well as your wicked thoughts. He knows where you have sincerely honored Him as well as where you have profaned His holy name.

God is not looking intently at you in order to evaluate your religion. He does not want to judge you—He has the *authority* to do so, and certainly He will exercise that authority in due time (2 Corinthians 5:10)—but this is not His immediate objective. What He wants to know above all else is your answer to this most important question:

Do you know Me in the way that I want you to know Me?

Someone says, “Of course I know God! After all, I *am* a Christian!”

The decision to be a Christian is an excellent one; there is no finer vocation. However, just because one is called a Christian does not mean he automatically *knows God* in the way He *wants* and *expects* that person to know Him. This is not accomplished through a mere profession of beliefs. One cannot know God merely by sitting on pews in church buildings, listening to sermons, or randomly skimming the Bible. To really *know* God requires serious investments of time, effort, and prayerful meditation. For these reasons alone, most people who call themselves Christians are simply unwilling to commit to this.

You are someone who is obviously willing to do something about this because you have picked up this book—hopefully with the intent of reading it in its entirety. You are obviously interested in *seeking the sacred*, which means you are deeply interested in drawing near to God. This book will help you to do this—perhaps much more than you will even realize.

The fact is, however, you do not need this book to draw near to God; the Bible is the real source of that information. This book is simply an expedient toward that endeavor. It is not meant to rival or replace your Bible. Instead, you will find that it contains hundreds of appeals *to* the Bible for accomplishing this very thing. God’s Word “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). I cannot tell you anything more concerning your *access to God* than what the Bible has already declared. Yet sometimes people need help with this subject, since drawing near to God is not an easy thing to do—even though God has already done (and continues to do) the most difficult part.

This book has been written, designed, and produced in order to help people better understand what the Word of God teaches on drawing near to the God of the Word. Its purpose is to give *anyone who wishes* an opportunity to look more deeply into the Scriptures so that they can draw more closely to God. It is not a mere “Bible study” where we open the Bible and comment on various passages—although it certainly is a study *of* the Bible. This book will help bring Bible passages to life and illuminate the pathway to God. It is meant to stimulate your thinking *upward*, since this is the direction that seekers of the sacred always look. Indeed, this is what the apostle Paul taught (Colossians 3:1-4):

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

God has put you here upon this earth so that you might seek Him. This requires that you not just think about Him, but that you think *like* Him (Ephesians 5:1). The God of heaven is anxious for your attention; the record of His love for you is both conclusive and compelling. He has something to offer you that this world is unable to provide: *life with Him*, which is “far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). He wants nothing more than to fill your heart with the realistic hope of being forever with Him. The full intention of this book is to show you all of these things so that you can pursue God in the way that He has always wanted you to pursue Him.

God is peering into your soul right now to see your response to His invitation to draw near to Him.

The goal of those who are “raised up with Christ” (Christians) is to “keep seeking the things above.” This means, in essence: we are to be in a constant state of elevating our love, thinking, and behavior to that which conforms to Christ—not this world, and certainly not our own preferences. God *expects* this of us because we *belong* to Him: we have surrendered ourselves to His will; we have pledged allegiance to Him above all else. Even those of us who have once “discovered” God may need to *rediscover* Him and engage in fellowship with Him on an even higher level than we have enjoyed previously.

Are you in need of “rediscovering” God? If so, then this book is most certainly for you. I think you will enjoy it immensely. This book is for all those who are searching for a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God: it is for those who desire a more intimate *fellowship* with God. Whoever you are, wherever you are presently in your spiritual walk with

the Lord—or even if you are interested in *beginning* that walk—this book can help you discover aspects of God that you may not have yet considered.

In order to enjoy deeper fellowship with the Lord, you must appreciate how glorious and sacred our Lord is. We are to approach Him “with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28); we cannot serve passively or incidentally the One who rules over all of heaven and earth. To do this appropriately requires a proper perspective of God, as well as recognition of our own humanity. We can certainly “draw near” to Him (James 4:8), but we cannot exceed our earthbound limitations.

Then again, men *have* seen the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Christ “is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3), and inasmuch as men have “seen” Christ, they have seen the Father (John 14:7-10). Jesus was God’s “in-the-flesh” revelation to man; He was God literally visualized and personified. Multitudes of people *saw* Christ walk upon the face of the earth, perform miracles, and exude heavenly wisdom. Some of these people actually spoke with Him, felt His gentle touch upon their broken bodies, and experienced His divine powers heal them of their demons and diseases. A few others journeyed with Him, ate with Him, and slept around the same campfire with Him. Three of them (Peter, James, and John) actually saw Him endued with heavenly glory (Matthew 17:1-6). Christ is the closest we will ever get (in this life) to seeing the glory of God, and yet none of *us* have seen Him.

This fact appears at first to defeat the entire premise of this book. After all, this book is about “seeking the sacred”; yet I have just implied that none of us will be able to *see* the sacred—at least in this life. On the other hand, it is not necessary to actually *see* something to believe in it. We practice this kind of faith all the time: we do not see the movement of electrons, but we believe in light and electricity; we do not see wind and centrifugal force, but we experience their effects in the weather; we do not see the gravitational pull of the moon’s mass upon the earth, but all life on earth depends upon the rise and fall of the oceans. Likewise, we do not need to see God in order to believe in Him. Thomas, one of the twelve disciples, vowed not to believe in a resurrected Messiah until he put his fingers in the holes of Jesus’ spike-impaled hands. Jesus let Thomas wait for

eight days before giving him this opportunity, upon which time He told him, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Then He rebuked him for his unnecessary doubt: “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:26-29).

God continues to gaze unblinkingly into your heart, examining your every thought. He asks you in a whisper so quiet that only your soul can hear it: Do you believe?

So it is with us: we are *blessed* if we believe in the God whom we literally cannot see. One of the paradoxes of Scripture is that visible affirmation is not always the key to enlightenment. The apostle Paul certainly “saw the light” of his errors concerning the Messiah during three days of blindness (Acts 9:1-18). Yet this idea works both ways: those who literally see may nonetheless remain unconverted, that is, spiritually blind. Many hard-hearted Pharisees saw Jesus and many of His works yet did not believe Him to be the Son of God. As John recorded in John 9:39-41,

And Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, “We are not blind too, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Thus, we do not have to see to believe; we do not have to see to be blessed. This is no support for *blind* faith, of course: what we *do* believe is based upon the irrefutable evidence of the glory of God that *is* seen in the physical and moral world. We “see” the Lord through what He has made (Romans 1:20), what His Spirit has written concerning Him (1 Peter 1:10-12), and how He works in our lives, “[causing] all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28).

We are not interested in seeing a mere silhouette of God or a mere

character sketch of His attributes (although it is beneficial to *study* His attributes, as we will do in this work). Rather, God wants us to be *seekers* of Him. This is made possible only through our faith in Him. God certainly *could* manifest His glory to us, but then we would believe only with our *eyes* and not with our *heart*. To believe with one's heart—to have faith in God—is far more difficult than to merely cognitively acknowledge His existence because of what one literally sees.

“Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). To be *seekers* of God is a far more noble pursuit than merely wanting to *see* God. This will not prevent us from desiring to see Him with our own eyes. However, it puts our longing for God and our craving for fellowship with Him in an appropriate context.

Thankfully, not only are we seekers of God, but He is also seeking us. Jesus once told a Samaritan woman that “an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers” (John 4:23). I want to be forever with the Lord; I assume that you do too. But God *also* wants us to be with Him; He is supremely interested in our quests for deeper fellowship with Him. In fact, He actively seeks after those of us who desire to worship Him. It would not matter how deeply we desired to be with God if He did not also desire us to be with Him. If not for His making our “seeking” possible, there would be nothing we could do to bring us one inch, one day, or one thought closer to Him.

Those who seek God must accept the all-encompassing demands of this search. As with any noble pursuit, we must have an appreciation of what it means to *be* a seeker of the sacred. We must realize the purpose behind that search—what it involves and what it demands of us personally. Zeal and passion are not enough by themselves; we must also *prepare* for that search. Our mind, skills, knowledge, and courage must all be concentrated and focused in such a way that the search we perform will be effective and efficient. We must be willing to postpone or remove altogether all other searches that rob us of the energy required to conduct the *greatest* search of our lives. Furthermore, we must possess a competent approach toward our

search: where to start, how to engage in it, and *why* it is to be conducted in the first place.

Any search for which the seeker has no clear purpose or objective is doomed from the start. A person cannot properly prepare for a search with a vague, pointless, indefinable goal. Someone searching for “peace,” for example, who has no clue what it looks like simply cannot organize his efforts in that direction. (The exasperating search for “world peace” within the fractured and self-serving international community is a good illustration of this: no one can really agree objectively what such “peace” looks like, much less how to achieve it.) One’s purpose must be clear, well-defined, and unmistakable. A vague objective will generate nothing more than a wild and fruitless search—kind of like flailing one’s arms and legs about in a hopeless attempt to swim. A great expenditure of time and energy does not *by itself* guarantee profitable results.

Christians are not above these necessary conditions, even though what (really, *Whom*) we seek is spiritual in nature. Likewise, we are not immune to the various pitfalls and hindrances that may plague the search itself. Christopher Columbus and other early transoceanic explorers, for example, did not confine their vision to a fixed point in time when they would literally gaze upon the very object of their search. They understood that the search itself was difficult, demanding, complicated—even life-threatening. These men had to know a lot about ships, ocean navigation, management of a ship’s crew (which included men who probably did not share the explorer’s passion for what was being sought, but instead, looked only for compensation for their efforts), and possess a fairly good sense of what and where it was they wanted to find. They also had to accept the losses and deprivations of pursuing their quest: months away from their homes and families, poor eating and living conditions, vermin, disease, malnutrition, and the incessant assault of scorching sun, driving rain, and salty ocean spindrift.

Likewise, Thomas Edison—another explorer of a different sort—searched for ways to improve upon the primitive technology of his day, but was not oblivious to the demands of that search. He spent many, many long hours of his life in experimentation and observation, trying to bring into

existence devices and machines which the world has since taken for granted. We can hardly imagine the discipline of mind and diligence of principle under which he must have labored. Thankfully, he was rewarded for his efforts.

Not everyone who so labors is thus rewarded. William Tyndale, for example, worked tirelessly to translate the Latin Bible (Vulgate) into English, only to be condemned as a heretic by the Roman Church for doing so. (Catholic officials once believed that to put Scripture in any “common” language like English was to blaspheme its holiness. They believed that Latin was the only acceptable sacred language.) As a result, Tyndale’s search for a Bible which the general populace could read was prematurely ended: he was burned alive at the stake in 1536.¹

Christians today also face difficult—perhaps even life-threatening—challenges. As with seafaring explorers of old, our search will be difficult, demanding, and sometimes complicated. As with the passionate inventor, so we must have discipline of mind and diligence of principle that cannot be abandoned for lesser things. As with those who sacrificed their lives for the greater good, so we must accept the fact that our search may not *appear* to be successful in our own lifetime, or that it will meet our own initial expectations. For the many ancient explorers who were successful, whose names have become part of human history, there were countless more who were unsuccessful, whose discoveries went unrecognized, or who have simply vanished from historical memory. Our own posterity may not even care that we *were* seekers. But we cannot linger on these negative aspects. Seeking after the sacred must be a noble and sacrificial pursuit in itself; it cannot be dependent upon any other factors or outcomes.

We also cannot think that if we just look hard enough, we will always find something worthwhile. As mentioned, the expenditure of great amounts of energy does not automatically translate to success. Likewise, luck has nothing to do with salvation. No one accidentally finds divine grace; no one stumbles into heaven. Instead, the seeker must know exactly what he is seeking after and must be (or quickly become) familiar with whatever tools, resources, and processes are necessary for making that search successful.

The joy of finding what we are searching for motivates us to endure the discomfort and frustration that accompanies that search. In this way, Jesus also looked beyond the cross and its suffering and humiliation. His focus was on the joy of obedience to the Father and the satisfaction of accomplishing what was in the best interest of all mankind: “for the joy set before Him [He] endured the cross...” (Hebrews 12:2). This incentive was sufficient to overcome all the difficulties on the way to His goal. So we too must endure the hardships of the search, knowing that our obedience and God’s grace will ultimately lead us where we ought to go. “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers” (1 Timothy 4:10).

God, His eyes fixed intently upon your thoughts, continues to watch for signs of your submission to His will. His Spirit whispers again: Have you fixed your hope on Me?

We must also recognize the desperate *need* for this search. Without engaging in this search, we imply that God is not worth seeking, and that our present knowledge, status, and ability are all that we need to rescue ourselves from this sinful world. This is absolutely untrue. Without God’s saving power, we are *unsaved people*. We are hopeless and lost without Him; without searching for God, we will not see Him in the end. Our seeking after the sacred, then, cannot be perceived merely as an exciting adventure, intriguing curiosity, or elaborate (but expendable) hobby. Rather, our spiritual, eternal future depends entirely upon it. We are not merely missing out on a great opportunity if we are not seekers, as though we have just missed a great deal on a Caribbean cruise or a new car; we are *ruined beyond redemption*. To be content with who we are or what we know presently is to consign ourselves to certain spiritual death. We cannot accept the horrible consequences of the *failure* to seek after the sacred. We cannot afford *not* to be seekers.

As seekers, we must also have personal desire and motivation. Jesus once said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). I want to emphasize the beginning of that statement: “If anyone *wishes*...” In other words, *only* whoever deeply desires the Lord is of the right disposition to be His disciple.

This is the first priority; this must *precede* the search itself. All those who *do* find Christ, having made Him the object of their pursuit, will be those who had earnestly desired to find Him in the first place.

This book is designed to whet your desire for the Lord. Even more so, God's Word is designed to whet this desire, which is why we will often look into it. No one can desire Him for you; no one draws near to God by proxy.

Meanwhile, God continues to look deeply, penetratingly, and probingly into your heart. His face is ever before your face. You possess the breath of life which He gave to you—His strong desire is for you to seek the Source of that life. He longs for your awareness of Him; He stands ready to lead your pursuit of His glory; He craves fellowship with your soul.

What, exactly, is *your* desire, dear reader? Do you know the Lord as He wants you to know Him? Are you truly a seeker of the sacred? Do you wish to *begin* your quest? Or do you wish to rise to the next level of your quest? If so, the rest of this book will explore exactly what this means and what you must do to fully and appropriately undertake that search.

In the end, however, you will find that the information you needed in order to accomplish this search was right before your eyes all the time. In the end, you will discover that *God* was looking lovingly and intently at you all along, leading you homeward to Him.

Endnotes

1 Tyndale completed translating the New Testament in 1525 and had begun working on the Old Testament when he died. His work was resumed and completed by his colleague Miles Coverdale in 1537, and Tyndale himself was posthumously exonerated (The Origin of the Bible, ed. by Philip Comfort [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992], 265.)

CHAPTER ONE

Becoming Seekers of God

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2:15-17

Just because something is important, beautiful, or transcendent does *not* mean everyone will see or appreciate it as such. Let me illustrate this at the expense of my wife, Honey (since it just seemed fitting to include her in this book *somehow*). And yes, that is her real name.

Honey and I spent our honeymoon traveling down the beautiful Oregon coast on Highway 101. We stopped at coastal towns from Astoria to Newport, visiting several parks and scenic lookouts along the way. One of the most memorable places we visited was Ecola State Park, which is a gorgeous viewpoint perched upon a huge bluff overlooking the ocean and the nearby town of Cannon Beach. It was early October, but skies were blue, sunshine filled the air, and it felt like summer.

Of course, since we were on our honeymoon, the emotions, senses, and perceptions of our travels were greatly enhanced by the thrill of our new life together. So when we first pulled into the parking lot of Ecola State Park, we were overwhelmed by our new-found freedom and the joy of sharing our life together. Thus, we just sat there in the car, soaking in the precious time we shared together, as well as the majesty and serenity of the

scene around us. Gnarled, weather-beaten trees posed for us in permanent wind-blown stances. Crisp, clean, autumn air slipped in quietly through the car's partly-opened windows. The sun smiled radiantly upon the coast, its rays sparkling across the water below the cliffs. About a half mile away, a lighthouse stood proudly and bravely upon a crag of rock surrounded by roiling water.

At least that's what captured *my* attention. Honey, however, was entranced on something of a much lesser scale. A groundskeeper was cutting the park's rich, green lawns with a riding lawnmower just beyond the parking lot, and he was obviously having some difficulty navigating his machine through the soft sod. I noticed Honey's distractedness, and even though I knew what she was focused upon, I asked anyway, "What are you looking at?" It was my way of saying, "Why are you looking at *that*?"

"I think he's stuck," she said, with a tinge of genuine concern for the man.

"I'm sure he'll be able to take care of himself," I reassured her. Apparently it was not enough reassurance.

"I wonder if he'll get that thing out of there," she wondered aloud. I also wondered: was she expecting me to latch onto him with a tow-rope and pull him out with our little four-cylinder sedan?

"I can't believe this," I said, both amused and slightly exasperated by the insignificance of her distraction. "Here we are sitting at one of the most beautiful spots of the entire Oregon coast, surrounded by all this beautiful scenery, and you're wondering what's going to happen to the lawnmower guy?"

Sheepish smile, slight fidgeting. "Well, it just looks like he's stuck."

Thus began our happy life of polar opposites together. (In her defense, Honey is often much more concerned about people, whereas I am often first taken with ambiance, concepts, and abstractions. This is why people want to spend much more time with her than they do with me! Plus

she is considerably more attractive than I am.)

Of course, that was just a silly illustration. Honey's distraction was harmless and my exasperation was purposely humorous and overly dramatic. But if this same scenario had been applied to spiritual matters, we would be dealing with a serious problem. For example, have you ever tried to focus someone's attention on the joy and grandeur of fellowship with God, only to have that person get sidetracked with some petty detail in his or her life—a bill to pay, vacation plans, car troubles, a TV show, a phone call, etc.? Similarly, how often have preachers tried to motivate the members of their congregation, only to have many of them sidetracked with “pressing things” that really are petty issues devoid of spiritual value?

Sometimes we can miss a *major* thing by focusing too much on a *minor* detail. This seems to be an all-too-common phenomenon: a person foregoes a deeper exploration of his eternal life because he is completely distracted with his secular life. Put another way: he is unable to become a seeker of the sacred because he does not realize that what is here on earth cannot fulfill his soul's desire. Or he does not realize how hungry and thirsty his soul is for God, since he tries to satisfy his spiritual appetite with useless scraps of the world.

Is Nothing Sacred?

We might assume that Christians naturally dwell on holiness and related subjects. However, there is nothing “natural” about dwelling on the unseen world. I myself find it difficult to sustain these thoughts over a long period of time. After a while, despite my best intentions, my humanity and secular life starts creeping into my thoughts and begins eroding my concentration. I'm not making excuses for myself, or for you; rather, I believe I am defining a common human behavior. Since we are human people living in a physical world dominated by secular thinking and “the sensual conduct of unprincipled men” (2 Peter 2:7), it is a real challenge for us to stay focused upon spiritual ideals and virtues for an extended period of time. This does not mean it is impossible, just difficult. Difficult things require much more energy and concentration than simple, mindless exercises. Let's face it: it takes a great deal less energy to watch a two-hour movie (provided

you *like* the movie) than it is to engage in a half-hour meditative Bible study and then pray meaningfully for God to help you be like the Christ about whom you just read. Bible reading and prayer are certainly not the only spiritual activities Christians engage in, but if we *neglect* these, then we will soon cease to be spiritual.

In a related thought, it is hard to get people to think about the sacred when so many of us are bent on sensual or personal gratification. In our pursuit of personal pleasure, we often unwittingly (or uncaringly) forfeit spiritual values. This doesn't mean the average Joe intentionally sets out to trash everything that *is* sacred. It does mean, however, that many people never take the time or have the forethought to discern between mere entertainment and actual sacrilege. You've heard the question asked, "Is nothing sacred anymore?" It does seem that much of what used to be regarded as sacred is no longer so, or is being threatened with commonality, indifference, or intentional blasphemy.

It is easy to see why a discussion of the sacred can become lost upon a person who lives in this sort of social climate. Our perverted, voyeuristic society has not helped much. Watch a few of the trashy talk shows, purely shameless exposé shows ("The Jerry Springer Show"), or any shows where we are invited to leer at someone else's indignity and bad behavior ("Lost," "Big Brother," et al) and you will get a taste of our trampling on whatever used to be sacred. In these shows, marriage is a sham, friends are intentionally greedy and self-centered, relationships are expendable, and every dirty little secret can be divulged for a moment's glory in front of a national audience.

Fascination with voyeurism and lurid sensationalism does not exemplify the fringe element of our society, but is increasingly becoming the norm in America. Even many churchgoers, who profess to serve as the light and salt of the world, lap from the same cesspools as everybody else. The line between those who are supposed to be living as "children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (Philippians 2:15) and those who *are* the crooked and perverse is becoming thinner and fainter. The fault, then, does not lie only at the feet of those purveyors of profit who so often promote sacrilege—media and entertainment businesses—but also every person who, once he has tasted it, goes back for

seconds and thirds. In some way, on some level, nearly every one of us has a share in the guilt.

Separating the Sacred from the Profane

God does not want us to be comfortable with sacrilege but busy carrying out our sacred service to Him. This means we must “draw near” to Him (James 4:8); we must become seekers of the sacred. To become such a seeker, it is necessary *first* to gain an appreciation for the critical differences between God’s heavenly world and man’s secular world so that we will have a better understanding of what “seeking the sacred” means.

When we talk about the nature of God, or even the nature of the heavenly realm of God, we are speaking of the *sacred*. In this context, “sacred” indicates that which defines God or is used *by* God for carrying out His will. The realm of the “flesh”—self-serving human desires and the secular world that caters to the carnal nature of man—is *profane* in comparison to the sacredness of God. Sacred and profane are opposites: they stand contrary and opposed to one another. To illustrate this, consider what the apostle Paul wrote (Romans 8:5-9, bracketed words mine):

For those who are according to the flesh [i.e., those who are profane to God] set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit [i.e., those who are sacred to God], the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

To “not belong to Him [Christ]” is to belong to something else—really, to be *led by* someone other than Christ. This is what the gospel teaches elsewhere (Galatians 5:16-17, 25, bracketed words mine):

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please [i.e., that our carnal-minded, human desires want to do]. . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

Notice the *conflict* between the realm of the sacred and the profane world: the one is “set against” the other; they are “in opposition to one another.” This does not illustrate a peaceful coexistence between the two realms, but an aggressive antagonism. One is both sacred and holy or he is worldly and profane. A person is either holy, as God is holy, or he is profane, as the world is profane; he cannot walk a fine line between the two. Thus a “worldly Christian” is an oxymoron, since there is no reconciling these two terms; they are incompatible states of being.

“Holy” refers to that quality or state of being which defines and originates only from God. It refers generally to that which God has set apart for His use, but specifically to the distinct nature of God Himself. Unfortunately, many Christians may have only a surface understanding of what “holy” is. This is partly because typical Bible classes and sermons focus more upon proper conduct rather than godly hearts, the latter of which necessarily involves *holiness*. The difference is that visible behavior only touches on the visible, external life, whereas holiness permeates one’s invisible soul. When we only concentrate on the external, we only change outward behavior, not necessarily our inward being. God certainly wants sinful and inappropriate behavior to cease, but not at the expense of or as a replacement for internal conformity to Christ. If our “inner man” is truly being “renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16), this will produce a visible effect on the outward man.

Ideally, the more we learn about Christ, the more we are compelled to look beyond His external behavior and begin to appreciate what motivated that behavior in the first place. Instead of merely asking, “*What* did Jesus do?” we begin asking, “*Why* did Jesus do that?” Christ was not just a “good person”; He was a *holy* person. But what about you and I—can we be holy

people too? Not only can we, but we were created to serve God in that capacity. In other words, God *expects* us to be holy (1 Peter 1:16).

Unfortunately, our culture has given us a rather stereotypical view of holiness. Hollywood, for example, portrays holiness through a sanctuary-associated image—usually an ornate, classical-designed, even ominous-looking church building. Elaborately adorned priests and other clerics contribute to the holiness effect, since they are understood to be the official, ordained custodians of everything that is holy. Relics and sacred objects, which are almost always rare and antique, associated with some mysterious occurrence, and/or endowed with some almost-magical property are commonly given special attention. Thus, ornate crosses, chalices, statuettes, ancient books, basins of “holy water,” special vestments, and candles—*lots* of candles—are used to create an ambiance of reverence and sacredness.

While such portrayals are supposed to emphasize the presence of God, quite the opposite is true. They all emphasize *not* the spiritual, but the worldly—not the sacred, but the secular. These depictions teach us that we need *men* to build holy shrines, craft holy images and venerated objects, ordain priests, beatify souls, and uphold an object’s sacred properties. Take away the work of man and the allegedly “sacred” distinction is lost. An ordained priest is only a priest, for example, because men have conferred this honor upon him. Without man’s having so recognized him, he loses all “holy” distinction. Likewise, church buildings are only considered sacred because we have deemed them as such. If the building is sold to someone who turns it into a garage or a dance hall, it loses all sense of sacredness: same building, different context. So it is with all other seemingly sacred positions, objects, and denominational beliefs. They are only sacred because man has paid any attention to them. Once he turns away, they cease to be sacred. In most cases, they simply cease to exist altogether.

What God Holds Sacred

Let’s consider this thought from a slightly different angle. Suppose I have a picturesque, secluded, wooded piece of property, and in the midst of the trees is a certain spot which I have deemed sacred. It is my special place where I go to meditate, find serenity, and get away from it all. It may

be only an undefined spot in the woods to anyone else, but to me it is a holy, cathedral-like sanctuary. The fact that you do not regard my special place as sacred does not make it any less sacred to me; however, without my ability to perpetuate the sacredness of this place, it will lose all such distinction. When I die, whatever is sacred only to me cannot be protected by me anymore. At that point, a developer may bulldoze my wooded property, build a dozen condominiums, and never give a second thought to my special place in the midst of the trees.

My point is: just because we privately regard something as sacred does not mean that this thing is sacred to God—or to anyone else. Our sense of holiness and God’s are not automatically synonymous or interchangeable. This does not mean we cannot have our own personal sacred places, memories, or heirlooms. It simply means we cannot impose heavenly sacredness upon our subjective decisions, nor can we equate our own worldly sense of the sacred upon heavenly sacredness. What is holy to us is not always holy to God, and vice versa.

“Sacred” (or holy) in the biblical context does not merely refer to something that is important to *us*. Rather, it refers to something important to God *regardless* of us. Those things which are universally sacred are this way because God has designated them as such. Truly sacred things, concepts, or people are beyond our ability to ordain otherwise. Furthermore, these things remain sacred even though we ignore or refuse to acknowledge them. For example, God has made the marriage of a man and a woman to be a sacred union. Yet today we see people everywhere degrading marriage through polygamy, adultery, divorce, homosexual unions, and even incestuous relationships. Does this mean that because many have desecrated marriage, marriage itself no longer has any reference to a holy God? Absolutely not. The source of the sacredness of the marriage union transcends this world. God is the One who legitimizes marriage (Matthew 19:4-6); it is sacred to Him regardless of who does or does not honor this.

God does not sanctify things (or people) for any reason. He always acts with a specific purpose and according to a specific design. His will and judgment are always perfect. He has no discrepancy, no flaw, no Achilles’ heel, “no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). God is absolutely

perfect in all that He is and does. He is, without any figurative speech, *the Perfect*. To refuse His perfect will, or to question His flawless judgment, is to uphold something worldly and unholy. In essence, it is to put ourselves in God's place, or even above Him—something of which we have no authority to do. To think that we *can* improve God arrogantly implies that we are in some way superior to Him. This is illogical, given the fact that we all live in subordination to His natural laws and are accountable to His moral laws.

Those who carelessly disregard what is sacred not only denigrate the sacred thing itself, but also One who made it sacred in the first place. One who profanes God's holiness also incurs His judgment: we were created to *honor* Him in whose image we are made (Genesis 1:26), not to question or disregard Him. God has the authority—both the power *and* right—to punish those who have no regard for His holiness. For example, when Moses stood in the land of Midian and stared in amazement at a bush filled with fire but that was not being consumed by that fire (Exodus 3:1-5), God told him to take off his sandals because “the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Certainly Moses did not make that ground holy; but he could not desecrate it, either, without having to answer directly to God for the offense. Likewise, whenever God tells us to *do something* in observance of His holiness, we are not to shrug off the instruction or offer what we might think is a clever counter-proposal. We are simply to respect whatever He deems sacred; we are expected to show deep reverence to the Holy God of heaven through our sincere obedience.

The Mystery of the Sacred

Even though He has revealed His will to man through the gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16-17), God Himself still remains enshrouded in *mystery*. Whatever we know about God's sacredness is completely overwhelmed by what we do *not* know. (We will examine this more closely in upcoming chapters.) The human psyche is naturally drawn toward a good mystery; thus, the mysteriousness of God does not ruin our fascination with Him, but makes Him more attractive and captivating to us.

Not only is God mysterious, but so may be those sacred things which are directly connected to Him. To continue an earlier example: marriage

is a sacred union given to us by God, yet there is a certain sense of mystery concerning the union of two people becoming “one” (cf. Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31). While we understand *some* aspects of this union, others exist which transcend human comprehension and defy earthly explanation. In trying to explain the intimacy of the marriage union, we ultimately are forced to reckon with the mysterious nature of God; both remain elusive and inexplicable to us. Furthermore, no matter how familiar one is with his spouse, he still does not know her absolutely. There is a certain mystery concerning that person’s full identity—her soul, really—that eludes human detection. He may know all of her habits, idiosyncrasies, and even every flexure and detail of her body, but he cannot know her as intimately as she knows herself, which is still not as intimately as God knows her. There exists a definite sacred quality to the spiritual identification of each person—a quality that transcends anyone’s ability to define or explain.

The gospel is sacred in this same sense: even though we know what the gospel message *says*, we do not know all the dynamics behind what makes it work or what empowers it. The Bible says “the word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12)—but we struggle with what that means exactly. We will never grasp the full depth and scope of what *makes* God’s Word “living and active”; this is a mystery which we are unable to solve. The Bible contains the Holy Spirit’s message of redemption, which has been accurately communicated to us through inspired apostles. However, no written language is capable of conveying the full detail of God’s infinite work—nor is this necessary in order for us to believe in God. Those who limit “the word of God” to a written text (the literal Bible) cannot possibly explain its “living and enduring” nature. Others attempt to constrain the ability of the Holy Spirit to what He has revealed to us, but His *revelation to man* and His *infinite deity* are certainly not one and the same. Even the sacredness of what God *has* revealed necessarily implies certain aspects that exceed human understanding.

God has only told us what He wants us to know of Him (or His Son, or His Spirit), which is what creates this aura of mystery which surrounds Him. He has the right to limit to us information concerning Him, but this does not mean He has withheld from us what we need to know. As Moses declared, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things {He

has} revealed belong to us and to our sons forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). That which is revealed *by* God is sacred *to* God; yet we still do not have a comprehensive picture of the Sacred God. Anyone who says that he “knows God” can only know what God has *revealed* to him; he cannot know anything beyond this. God’s holiness prevents us from knowing anything more than what He has chosen to disclose. (I want to clarify: *we* do not create or perpetuate God’s mysteriousness—*He* does.) This is part of what makes God and those things associated with Him so intriguing and attractive to us. He is real and genuine, but He is mysterious. We can have fellowship with Him, but there is much to that relationship that we simply cannot yet know.

Unfortunately, some emphasize the unexplainable mysteriousness of God at the expense of that which He has disclosed. They may be intrigued with miracles—real and imagined—but they do not always obey the God behind all genuine miracles. They want to see displays of God’s power, but may be unwilling to submit themselves to the message confirmed *by* that power (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:4). Having fixated on the signs, they miss the substance of why the Sacred God has revealed Himself *in* those signs.

Similarly, some may be magnetically drawn to the gospel of Christ, but not necessarily for the right reasons. Many have tried, in their own ways, to solve the mystery of Christ (or what they consider to *be* the mystery) because they are unwilling to accept what has been clearly revealed. In seeking to understand what cannot *be* known, they imply that they are unsatisfied with what God *wants* them to know. They say things like, “I simply want to know God better,” but what they mean is that they are unhappy with God’s decision to withhold information from them, and that their quest is to extract from God more than what He intended to reveal.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who see no mystery at all in God’s Word, and therefore rob it of its sacredness. Such people have approached the Bible so logically, analytically, and pedantically that it has been reduced, in their eyes, to a mere clinical study of ancient texts and languages. Thus, the Bible has all the intrigue of, say, a wiring diagram for a new car. The Bible is a “sacred” text to them only because it came from heaven, not because questions remain. There is nothing to solve because there was nothing unknown in the first place which higher education and a

doctorate in theology could not make known to them. They have heaven all figured out because they are among the elite and the enlightened.

So then, we have people on either end of the spectrum: those who are trying desperately and often fancifully to *solve* the mystery, and those who are convinced that there really was nothing mysterious to begin with. Both positions assume too much and believe too little; both positions do not express *faith* in God, but actually rely on human ability. The first position assumes that every heavenly secret must be exposed, and that this should be the chief endeavor of Christians everywhere. The second position assumes that higher knowledge and exhaustive dissertations will overcome all the obstacles to knowing God. Thus, we have fanciful dreamers (people who are caught up with intrigue—and perhaps little else) and modern-day Gnostics (people who have reduced salvation to the mere possession of human knowledge).²

Somewhere in the middle is the voice of reason, the person who is not seeking to solve the unsolvable nor deny that a mystery does exist. While some are trying to *remove* the sacred, there are others—like you, I trust—who are content with the fact that many questions concerning the heavenly will never be answered in this life. Why then did God leave us with unanswered questions? In order to make a point: we are *not* complete here and were *never* meant to be complete here. We *are* to study the Word in order to present ourselves approved to God (2 Timothy 2:15), but never with a smug anticipation of knowing all that the Holy Spirit knows. We will spend the rest of this book investigating how we *are* to live as seekers of the sacred, but we simply cannot know for certain what God has not told us. Even our profound understanding of this present world is inherently dwarfed by our inability to understand God and His world. On the other hand, God does not need to answer all of our questions or satisfy all our curiosities in order to be God. Faith in God means that He does not have to explain everything to us.

God is not a mystery that will *never* be solved, however. By doing what He says and living as He has prescribed, someday He will reveal Himself to us as He actually is. As Paul said, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as

I also have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). This will not make those things or God Himself any less sacred, but will give us an entirely new appreciation and definition *for* what is sacred.

Escape from the World

God wants us to appreciate the sacredness—and even the mystery—of His existence and His Word. This, of course, requires a great deal of our time and energy in order to overcome the unrelenting allure—or the incessant bombardment—of the world. The gravitational-like attraction of the secular life is extremely powerful and not easily overcome. For example, in order for a rocket to leave the earth’s gravitational field (a.k.a. “escape velocity”), it must travel over 25,000 miles per hour. That requires a tremendous amount of power (thrust) and energy (fuel). Even though men have learned how to produce such power, no man is capable of producing that power *himself*. No man, no matter how strong or zealous he might be, is powerful enough to escape the earth’s gravity *alone*.

This example is analogous to the type of power and energy that is required for a person to overcome the pull and draw of the secular life so as to live in a spiritual life with God. This is power and strength that you and I are *unable to exert* on our own, since it supersedes that which we are even capable of producing. This does not mean that this is a hopeless pursuit; however, it means that we need God to help us, and that we are unable to be helped by anyone or anything else. God’s grace—whatever power He provides or blessing He extends to us for the sake of our salvation—is what we must have in order to overcome the satanic, worldly clutch on our souls. Think about this idea with regard to what Peter said (2 Peter 1:2-4):

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

God's "divine power" is able to extract us from the grip of the secular world and bring us safely into the realm of spiritual life with Him. Through His Word, His power, His knowledge, His glory, and His excellence, God provides us the ability to be "partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption" of this secular world.

How important is it that we escape this corruption? This world is temporary and offers no refuge for the soul. Every person who does *not* seek after the sacred becomes engulfed in the quagmire of the world: all such people forfeit their souls and gain nothing in exchange. Or as John declared, "The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17). Given this, it is extremely important that we escape the destruction of this world.

God does not want us merely to escape the world and its lusts. He wants us to find refuge and spiritual completion in *Him*. These two things, then, must go hand in hand: in order to escape the world's corruption, one must become a seeker of the sacred. Put another way: the *only way* to escape the destruction of this world (and everyone who chooses to remain identified with it) is to find salvation and fellowship in the Lord Himself. There is no other way to escape one's total and irretrievable loss; there is no other way to gain total and absolute *fulfillment* of everything one's soul needs and craves. There is no heaven but God's heaven.

Before we go on dreaming about heaven, however, we must be realistic as to how to get there. We will not achieve heaven by wallowing in the human-inspired thinking and gratification of this world. The apostle Peter wrote, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14-16). This means: you must be *seeking the sacred*—not just something sacred, but the One who *defines* sacredness.

You must seek after God Himself.

Endnotes

2 Gnosticism refers to a first-century philosophy that taught that the route to true enlightenment was through secret and privileged knowledge which only certain people (Gnostics) possessed. It assumed that those who do not know the secrets of God cannot partake in the salvation of God. (It is widely believed that the First Epistle of John, for one, was a direct rebuttal to this elitist doctrine.) Gnosticism has since been repackaged in many different forms, and seems to be alive and well today in seminaries and theological academia.