



R. C. SPROUL

The Holiness of God
Chosen by God
Pleasing God

THREE VOLUMES IN ONE

CLASSIC TEACHINGS
ON THE NATURE OF GOD

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 HENDRICKSON
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CLASSIC TEACHINGS ON THE NATURE OF GOD

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THE HOLINESS OF GOD

R. C. SPROUL



*To Kaki and Ryan
and to their generation,
that they may live during
a new reformation*



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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 ALLAN 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-crusted blanket. I felt the crunch under my feet as I walked toward the center of campus. The moon cast a ghostly pall on the 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 cobblestone 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 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 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 forming 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.

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. Okay. 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.

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.

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. 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?

TWO



Holy, Holy, Holy

*Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread.
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

The prophet in Old Testament Israel was a lonely man. He was a rugged individualist singled out by God for a painful task. He served as a prosecuting attorney of sorts, the appointed spokesman of the Supreme Judge of heaven and earth to bring suit against those who had sinned against the bench.

The prophet was not an earthly philosopher who wrote his opinions for scholars to discuss; he was not a playwright who composed dramas for public entertainment. He was a messenger, a herald of a cosmic king. His announcements were prefaced by the words “Thus says the Lord” (NASB).

The record of the lives of the prophets reads like a history of martyrs. Their history sounds like a casualty report from the Third Division in World War II. The life expectancy of a prophet was that of a marine lieutenant in combat.

When it is said of Jesus that “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isa. 53:3), it is clear that He stood in a long line of men whom God had appointed to such suffering. The prophet’s curse was solitude; his home was often a cave. The desert was his traditional meeting place with God. Nakedness was sometimes his wardrobe, a wooden stock his necktie. His songs were composed with tears.

Such a man was Isaiah ben Amoz.

In the panoply of Old Testament heroes, Isaiah stands out in stellar relief. He was a prophet of prophets, a leader of leaders. He is called a “major prophet” because of the vast size of the written material that bears his name.

As a prophet, Isaiah was unusual. Most prophets were of humble origins: peasants, shepherds, farmers. Isaiah was of the nobility. He was a recognized statesman, having access to the royal court of his day. He consorted with princes

and kings. God used him to speak to several monarchs of Judah, including Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

What set a prophet of Israel apart from all other men was the sacred auspices of his call. His call was not from men. He could not apply for the job. He had to be selected—chosen directly and immediately by God. And the call was sovereign; it could not be refused. (Jeremiah tried to refuse his call but was abruptly reminded by God that He had consecrated Jeremiah from his mother's womb. When, after a term in this office, Jeremiah sought to resign, God refused to accept his resignation.) The job of prophet was for life. There was no quitting or retiring with pension.

The record of the call of Isaiah is perhaps the most dramatic of all such calls recorded for us in the Old Testament. We are told that it came to pass in the year that King Uzziah died.

King Uzziah died in the eighth century B.C. His reign was important in Jewish history. He was one of the better kings who ruled over Judah. He was not a David, but neither was he noted for the corruption that characterized the kings of the north, such as Ahab. Uzziah ascended to the throne when he was sixteen years old. He reigned in Jerusalem for fifty-two years. Think of it, fifty-two years! In the past fifty-two years, the United States has witnessed the administrations of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Bush. But many people in Jerusalem lived their entire lives under the reign of King Uzziah.

The Bible tells us that Uzziah began his reign in godliness, doing “what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Chron. 26:4). He sought after God, and God blessed him. He was victorious in battle over the Philistines and other nations. He built towers in Jerusalem and strengthened the city walls. He dug massive cisterns in the desert and stimulated great expansion in the nation's agriculture. He restored the military power of Judah to a standard almost as high as it had been under David. For most of his career Uzziah was noted as a great and beloved king.

The story of Uzziah ends with a sad note, however. The last years of his life were like those of a Shakespearean tragic hero. His career was marred by the sin of pride committed after he acquired great wealth and power. He tried to play God. He boldly entered the temple and arrogantly claimed for himself the rights that God had given only to the priests. When the priests of the temple tried to stop his act of sacrilege, Uzziah became enraged. While he was screaming at them in fury, leprosy broke out on his forehead. The Bible says of him: “He lived in a separate house, being a leper, . . . cut off from the house of the LORD” (2 Chron. 26:21, NASB). When Uzziah died, in spite of the shame of his later years,

it was a time of national mourning. Isaiah went to the temple, presumably looking for consolation in a time of national and personal grief. He got more than he bargained for: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isa. 6:1).

The king was dead. But when Isaiah entered the temple, he saw another king, the Ultimate King, the One who sat forever on the throne of Judah. He saw the Lord.

Notice how in Isaiah 6:1 the word *Lord* is printed. It begins with a capital letter and then is finished with lowercase letters. This stands in contrast with the word *LORD* that occurs later in the text and frequently in Scripture. Sometimes the word *Lord* appears in all capital letters—*LORD*. This is not an error in printing or a mere inconsistency on the part of the translator. Most English translations of the Bible follow this device of rendering the word *Lord* sometimes in lowercase letters and other times in uppercase letters. The reason for this difference is that two different Hebrew words are used in the original text, but both are rendered in English by the word *Lord*.

When the word *Lord* occurs in lowercase letters, the translator is indicating to us that the word *adonai* is found in the Hebrew Bible. *Adonai* means “sovereign one.” It is not the name of God. It is a title for God, indeed the supreme title given to God in the Old Testament. When *LORD* appears in all capital letters it indicates that the word *Jahweh* is used in the Old Testament. *Jahweh* is the sacred name of God, the name by which God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush. This is the unspeakable name, the ineffable name, the holy name that is guarded from profanity in the life of Israel. Normally it occurs only with the use of its four consonants—*yhw*. It is therefore referred to as the sacred tetragrammaton, the unspeakable four letters.

We see, for example, this contrast in words found in the Psalms. Psalm 8 reads, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1). What the Jew was saying was, “O Jahweh, our Adonai, how excellent is your name in all the earth.” Or we could render it, “O God, our sovereign one, how excellent. . . .” Again we read in Psalm 110: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand’ ” (Ps. 110:1). Here the psalmist is saying, “God said to my sovereign, sit at my right hand.”

LORD is the name of God; *Lord* is His title. We speak of President George W. Bush. *George* is his name; *president* is his title. If the highest office in our land is the office of president, so the highest office and title in Israel was the office of Sovereign. The title *adonai* was reserved for God. It was the title that was given to Jesus in the New Testament. When Christ is called “Lord,” He is invested with

the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament *adonai*. Jesus is called the King of kings and Lord of lords, gaining a title that beforehand was reserved only for God the Father, the supreme Sovereign of heaven and earth.

These different uses of the words *LORD* and *Lord* indicate the care with which people communicated God's holy nature. In some ways that is similar to my choosing to use capital letters when I use a pronoun to refer to God. Because God is unspeakably holy, I cannot bring myself to refer to Him as "him," even though my younger readers may be bothered by what they perceive to be an outdated use of capital letters. To me it is a gesture of respect and awe for a holy God.

When Isaiah came to the temple, there was a crisis of sovereignty in the land. Uzziah was dead. The eyes of Isaiah were opened to see the real king of the nation. He saw God seated on the throne, the sovereign one.

Humans are not allowed to see the face of God. The Scriptures warn that no person can see God and live. We remember Moses' request when he ascended the holy mountain of God. Moses had been an eyewitness of astonishing miracles. He had heard the voice of God speaking to him out of the burning bush. He had witnessed the river Nile turn into blood. He had tasted manna from heaven and had gazed upon the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. He had seen the chariots of Pharaoh inundated by the waves of the Red Sea. Still he was not satisfied. He wanted more. He craved the ultimate spiritual experience. He inquired of the Lord on the mountain, "Let me see your face. Show me your glory." The request was denied:

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." (Exod. 33:19–23)

When God told Moses that he could see His back, the literal reading of the text can be translated "hindquarters." God allowed Moses to see His hindquarters but never His face. When Moses returned from the mount, his face

was shining. The people were terrified, and they shrank away from him in horror. Moses' face was too dazzling for them to look upon. So Moses put a veil over his face so that the people could approach him. This experience of terror was directed at the face of a man who had come so close to God that he was reflecting God's glory. This was a reflection of the glory from the back of God, not the refulgent glory of His face. If people are terrified by the sight of the reflected glory of the back parts of God, how can anyone stand to gaze directly into His holy face?

Yet the final goal of every Christian is to be allowed to see what was denied to Moses. We want to see Him face-to-face. We want to bask in the radiant glory of His divine countenance. It was the hope of every Jew, a hope instilled in the most famous and beloved benediction of Israel:

The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num. 6:24–26)

This hope, crystallized in the benediction of Israel, becomes more than a hope for the Christian—it becomes a promise. John tells in his first letter: “We are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Here is the promise of God: We shall see Him as He is. Theologians call this future expectation the beatific vision. We will see God *as He is*. This means that someday we will see God face-to-face. We will not see the reflected glory of a burning bush or a pillar of cloud. We will see Him as He is, as He is in His pure, divine essence.

Right now it is impossible for us to see God in His pure essence. Before that can ever happen, we must be purified. When Jesus taught the Beatitudes, He promised only a distinct group the vision of God: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8). None of us in this world is pure in heart. It is our impurity that prevents us from seeing God. The problem is not with our eyes; it is with our hearts. Only after we are purified and totally sanctified in heaven will we have the capacity to gaze upon Him face-to-face. “Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying” (Isa. 6:2).