

# Some Thoughts on the Nature of God, Part Five (revised)

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*The Nature of God (Revised)*

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The revelation of Jesus Christ, chapter 4.

1 After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this."

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. 3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

6 Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. 7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second living creature like a calf, the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. 8 The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

11 "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

Let's pray.

*Almighty God, focus our minds and hearts now upon your word. Speak to us, Lord, as we approach once again this holy topic of the very nature of our God. We need your help. Keep us from error. Guide our thoughts. Focus our minds. And, Lord, speak to hearts, we ask in Christ's name. Amen.*

Thus far in our brief series on the nature of God, we've seen that all that we can know of God comes to us either from general revelation, what we also call natural revelation, what we see in the world around us or from special revelation, that is: what he has revealed about himself through special means, through his inspired word and through the person of his own Son who is called the express image of his person. God is revealed in Scripture to be self-existent, eternal, a spirit without a body like men. He's all-knowing, that is omniscient. He's all-powerful, omnipotent. He's not bound by space, he's omnipresent. He's not bound by time as time is a feature of our solar system and he's not bound by our solar system. He's revealed in Scripture to be not a mere force but a personal being who cares for his children as a loving father or loving mother cares for a child. He is immutable, that is, unchangeable. He is faithful, good, patient and long suffering.

But no description of God's nature, no attempt to characterize him can adequately do so without addressing the attribute that we consider this morning: the holiness of God. "Who is like unto thee, O Lord? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness?" Exodus 15:11. "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He," Deuteronomy 2:4. "There is none holy as the Lord," 1 Samuel 2:2. "As for God, his way is perfect," Psalm 18:30. "Sing unto the Lord O ye saints of his and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness," Psalm 30:4. "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name for thou only art holy," Revelation 15:4. The root meaning of the words translated "holy" or "holiness" is "separate" or "separateness." To say that God is holy is to say that he is utterly separated from all defilement. He is the only being who is independently, infinitely and unchangeably holy.

The Bible says, "God is light and in him is no darkness at all," 1 John 1:5. Holiness is foundational to his nature. He cannot be unholy. "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil. Thou cannot look upon iniquity," Habakkuk 1:13. It's this perfection above any other which is celebrated before God's throne in the few little incidents where we get a look at the scene before God's holy throne in Scripture. The Seraphim cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory," Isaiah 6:3.

Pastor John Howe wrote, "This may be said to be a transcendent attribute that, as it were, runs through the rest and casts luster upon them. It is an attribute of attributes." Puritan author Stephen Charnock wrote, "It is the glory of all the rest. As it is the glory of the Godhead, so it is the glory of every perfection in the Godhead. As his power is the strength of them, so his holiness is the beauty of them. As all would be weak without almighty to back them, so all would be uncomely without holiness to adorn them. Should this be sullied, all the rest would lose their honor. As at the same instant the sun should lose its light, it would lose its heat, its strength, its generative and quickening

virtue. As sincerity is the luster of every grace in a Christian, so is purity the splendor of every attribute in the Godhead.” His justice is a holy justice. His wisdom a holy wisdom. His arm of power a holy arm, Psalm 98:1. His truth or promise a holy promise, Psalm 105:42. His name, which signifies all his attributes in conjunction, is holy. Psalm 103:1.

We see God's holiness in his works. “The Lord is righteous in all his ways and holy in all his works,” Psalm 145:17. All he creates, all he does in his dealings with mankind is holy.

We see God's holiness in his law. “The law is holy and the commandment holy and just and good,” Romans 7:12. “The commandment of the Lord is pure enlightening the eyes. The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,” Psalm 19.

And, of course, we see God's holiness most clearly in the atonement. How heinous must sin be to a holy God. How heinous must sin be to a holy God if he would allow his own dear Son to die to atone for it.

“Ye who think of sin but lightly,  
Nor suppose the evil great,  
Here may view its nature rightly,  
Here its guilt may estimate.  
Mark the Sacrifice appointed!  
See Who bears the awful load!  
'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed,  
Son of Man, and Son of God.”

Stephen Charnock wrote, “Not all the vials of judgment that have or shall be poured out upon the wicked world, nor the flaming furnace of a sinner's conscience, nor the irreversible sentence pronounced against the rebellious demons, nor the groans of the damned creatures – give such a demonstration of God's hatred of sin – as the wrath of God let loose upon His Son! Never did divine holiness appear more beautiful and lovely than at the time our Savior's countenance was most marred in the midst of His dying groans.” This he himself acknowledges in Psalm 22 when God had turned His smiling face from Him, and thrust His sharp knife into His heart, which forced that terrible cry from Him, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me!'”

He adores this perfection. “But thou art holy enthroned on the praises of Israel,” Psalm 22:3. Because God is holy, he hates all sin. Because God is holy, he hates all sin. “The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord,” Proverbs 15:26.

Author Jerry Bridges wrote in his book “The Pursuit of Holiness”: “Hate is such a strong word that we dislike using it. We reprove our children for saying that they hate someone yet when it comes to God's attitude toward sin, only a strong word such as hate conveys an adequate depth of meaning. Speaking of various sins in Israel, God says, 'For all these things are what I hate,' Zechariah 8:17. Every time we sin, we're doing something God hates. He hates our lustful thoughts. He hates our pride and our jealousy. He hates our

outbursts of temper, our rationalization that the end justifies the means. We need to be gripped by the fact that God hates all these things.”

Our conscience tells us that it's right that God should hate sin, even our sin, although our wills may rebel against that thought. C. S. Lewis, writing to give a brief explanation of Christianity to unbelievers speaks to this point. He says,

“It's no use either saying that if there is a God of that sort in absolute goodness, then you do not like him and are not going to bother about him for the trouble is that one part of you is on his side and really agrees with his disapproval of human greed and trickery and exploitation. You may want him to make an exception in your own case to let you off this one time but you know at bottom that unless the power behind the world really and unalterably detests that sort of behavior then he cannot be good. On the other hand, we know that if there does exist an absolute goodness, it must hate most of what we do. That is the terrible fix we are in. If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our efforts are in the long-run hopeless. But if it is, then we are making ourselves enemies to that goodness every day and are not in the least likely to do any better tomorrow. And so our case is hopeless again. We cannot do without it and we cannot do with it. God is the only comfort, he is also the *supreme terror*---the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. He is our only possible ally and we have made ourselves his enemies. But some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again.”

Since God hates all sin, sin cannot exist without deserving and requiring his punishment. A. W. Pink put it this way, “God has often forgiven sinners, but He never forgives sin; and the sinner is only forgiven on the ground of another having borne his punishment; for 'without shedding of blood is no remission.' That sin is paid for, in other words, Hebrews 9:22.”

Christian, do you understand? Do you understand that you're saved by works? Christian, do you understand that you're saved by works? “Wake up, Harold. The pastor just said we're saved by works!” “You must have heard him wrong. Don't nudge me again.” I say again, Christian, do you understand that you're saved by works? “Now, wait a minute, Pastor, I may not know much but if I know anything, I know that by grace we're saved through faith and it's not of works lest any man should boast.” Quite right. It is not of your works, we're saved by Christ's works. If he had not fulfilled all the requirements of the law, if he had violated any of God's holy commandments, we simply could not be saved. If he had succumbed to a temptation to steal or to lie or to covet, then we could not be redeemed. We're saved by the high priestly work of Christ on the cross, enduring the wrath of his Father for the sins of his sheep and we're saved by his lifetime of sinlessness that made such a substitutionary sacrifice acceptable to the Father.

I suspect that many of us have forgotten or maybe have never considered just how horrendous a thing sin is. Here I am an utterly dependent creature. I'm utterly dependent upon God who formed me in my mother's womb; who brought me into this world; who sends blood coursing through my veins; who fills my lungs with oxygen moment-by-

moment; who freely gave me sight and the ability to hear and senses of touch and taste; the ability to speak; the ability to think, even to think before I speak which I sometimes do. He gave me a loving family. He gave me a home. He gave me health, and the blessings of living in a land of liberty. He's graciously given me everything I have and he's directly or indirectly responsible for every ability or positive virtue that I enjoy and this gracious benevolent Creator and Sustainer asks me to obey him, to worship him, to glorify him and I have the gall to say no.

He tells me that his holy nature is such that he must punish disobedience. He tells me that he has a benevolent concern for me as one of his creatures, that I was created in his image and he doesn't want me to die. Will I keep his laws? No. We cannot grasp the revulsion that God has for sin because we're no longer holy creatures but we can get a taste of it by considering the way he responds to sin. For one sin, our first parents were banished from the Garden of Eden. For one sin, Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land. For one sin, Elisha's servant Gehazi was stricken with leprosy. For one sin, Uzzah and Ananias and Sapphira were slain. It would be just and right if every sin were punished with death. It would be just and right if every sin were punished with death because every sin is an act of treason against our Sovereign King.

R. C. Sproul points out that men and women recoil from what they view as the harshness of the Old Testament law in which there were 30 offenses that required the death penalty including for example, cursing your parents. We recoil from such things but every act of disobedience directed toward our Creator is in truth a capital offense. By the time of the Exodus, God in his grace had pared down the number to just thirty. Now, even those thirty seemed harsh to us today perhaps because God does not immediately execute judgment. He's been gracious for so long that we presume upon his grace. The question we should be asking is not, "Wait a minute, why did God take the lives of Ananias and Sapphira just for lying?" The question we should be asking is, "Why does God not take my life when I lie?" The answer is: God is gracious and merciful and long suffering. He's patient. He's kind. And so he often delays his justice. The problem is, we presume upon his grace so when his holiness or justice is demonstrated we cry foul.

You may recall hearing R. C. Sproul tell a perfect illustration of this. He says he was teaching about 250 students, I think he was teaching in college. He told these students that they would be required to turn in three papers that semester: the first one was due on September 30<sup>th</sup>, the second on October 30<sup>th</sup> and the third on November 30<sup>th</sup>. He told them that if they didn't turn their paper in on time for whatever reason, they would receive an F. Well, September 30<sup>th</sup> came and out of those 250 students, about 25 of them didn't turn in a paper and they came to Dr. Sproul and they said, "Please, forgive us just this once. We're not used to the rigors of campus life and all the responsibilities and papers for all of these different classes. Just give us a little more time." He said, "Alright, but if it happens again, you get an F." October 30<sup>th</sup> came. What do you think happened this time? This time about 50 students out of the 250 didn't turn in a paper. "Oh, please forgive us, Professor Sproul. We had Homecoming, a big game." "Alright, but if it happens next time, you get an F." He said they broke out into spontaneous song, "We love you Prof. Sproul, O yes we do."

Of course, November 30<sup>th</sup> came along and this time about 150 students out of the 250. You mathematics guys will know that's a majority and they were cavalier about it. "Anderson, where is your paper?" "Don't worry, Prof, I'll get it to ya." F. "Mr. Baker, where's your paper?" "I don't have it." F. What did the students say? "That's not fair! That's not fair." Dr. Sproul said, "You want justice? Anderson, you didn't hand in a paper on time in October, did you?" "No sir." F. "How about September?" "No sir." F. "You want justice? I'll go back and I'll give F's to the 25 students from September and the 50 students from October who actually earned them." You see, the unsaved man reasons, "I know God said not to do this but I've done it before and nothing bad happened so I suppose I can do it again." What's at work here? The sinner has grown accustomed to God's grace. But listen, November 30<sup>th</sup> is coming.

The same dynamic can be at work in the mind of a believer, of course. Satan wants the Christian to think, "Well, hey, Jesus died to pay for my sins so if I commit this little sin that I'm contemplating now, it's no big deal. Jesus' blood will cover it." The Apostle Paul responded to that thinking, "What then? Shall we sin because we're not under law but under grace? Certainly not. God forbid it. May it not be so. How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" Romans 6. The Apostle John wrote, "If we say we have fellowship with him and we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth," 1 John 1:6. This holy God who brought his wrath upon his own Son so that he might not have to bring it upon you didn't do that so he could now tolerate sin in your life. He did it because sin is intolerable to him and he did it to make sin intolerable to you. "You shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins." Christian, he didn't come to keep you in your sins, he came to save you from your sins.

If you've been truly redeemed, you will *hate sin* because it was sin that necessitated the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ for our redemption. The sinner who recognizes that the omniscient, omnipotent Creator has such a great love for him and such a great hatred of sin that he sacrificed his own Son for his redemption, that sinner will want to please the one who did that for him and the one who loved him so and he'll have a distaste for sin. You see, that forbidden fruit which was once so sweet upon his lips will now leave a foul taste in his mouth. Now, I do not mean to say that sin will no longer have any attraction to the redeemed sinner----that he is now beyond all temptation, you know that's not true, but sin is now recognized by him as something vile, something hideous.

You may remember Ravi Zacharias's account of something that happened in the life of Malcolm Muggeridge.

"Working as a journalist in India, he left his residence one evening to go to a nearby river for a swim. As he entered the water, across the river he saw an Indian woman from a nearby village who had come to have her bath. Muggeridge impulsively felt the allurement of the moment and temptation stormed into his mind. He had lived with this kind of struggle for years but had somehow fought it off in honor of his commitment to his wife, Kitty. On this occasion, however, he wondered if he could cross the line of marital fidelity. He struggled just for a moment and then he swam furiously toward the

woman, literally trying to outdistance his conscience. His mind fed him the fantasy that stolen waters would be sweet and he swam the harder for it. Now he was just 2-3 feet away from her and as he emerged from the water, any emotion that may have gripped him paled into insignificance when compared with the devastation that shattered him as he looked at her. She was old and hideous, he said, and her skin was wrinkled and worst of all, she was a leper. The creature grinned at me, he said, showing a toothless mask. The experience left Muggeridge trembling and muttering under his breath, ‘What a dirty, lecherous old woman.’ But then the rude shock of it dawned upon him. It was not the woman who was lecherous, it was his own heart.” For the true Christian called to a life of holiness, sin may still hold allurement from a distance, but viewed up close, it loses all of its beauty, all of its luster. It is seen for what it is.

Last week we considered God's faithfulness, God's goodness, God's patience. This week, we've considered for a few minutes his holiness. As God has called his people to faithfulness, goodness and patience, even so he has called us to holiness. The Lord commands his people, “I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves and you shall be holy for I am holy,” Leviticus 11:44. As a believer, you're called to “be renewed in the spirit of your mind, to put on a new man which was created according to God.” That is, which was recreated in his image, you might say. Listen to it again: put on the new man which was created according to God. In other words, after God's pattern. “In true righteousness and holiness,” Ephesians 4:23-24. “God did not call us to uncleanness but to holiness,” 1 Thessalonians 4:7. “Pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord,” Hebrews 12:14.

And so the question I would ask you to answer truthfully is: are you striving to live a holy life? Are you striving to live a holy life---life that brings honor to the Lord? Spurgeon put it this way,

“Are you seeking day by day to live above worldliness, the pride of life, and the ensnaring vice of avarice? Remember, it is for this that you have been enriched with the treasures of God. If you be indeed the chosen of God, and beloved by Him, do not suffer all the lavish treasure of grace to be wasted upon you. Follow after holiness; it is the Christian's crown and glory. An unholy church! it is useless to the world, and of no esteem among men. It is an abomination, hell's laughter, heaven's abhorrence. The worst evils which have ever come upon the world have been brought upon her by an unholy church. O Christian, the vows of God are upon you. You are God's priest: act as such. You are God's king: reign over your lusts. You are God's chosen: do not associate with Belial. Heaven is your portion: live like a heavenly spirit, so shall you prove that you have true faith in Jesus, for there cannot be faith in the heart unless there be holiness in the life.”

“Lord, I desire to live as one  
Who bears a blood-bought name,  
As one who fears but grieving Thee,  
And knows no other shame.”

Friend, if you are not striving to live a holy life, you may safely conclude that you are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in the heart of a believer will strive, will urge him, will exhort him, to live a holy life. If you're not striving to live a holy life, you may safely surmise that you are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. If you are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, you are unregenerate. You are dead in your sins. You are lost. You are headed for destruction. You are unsaved.

Now, you've been graciously spared by a holy God unto this very day. You've been granted another week to breath God's air and to eat God's food, to experience God's goodness, God's mercy but the day of grace will soon be over. The end of the semester is coming and a holy God will not accept your excuses indefinitely. You will be called to give an account and do not imagine that your half-hearted attempts to do good will somehow outweigh your covetousness and deceit and pride and selfishness and blasphemy and slander and ungratefulness, your murmuring and your lust and your idolatry and all other transgressions that spring from your sinful heart. One day soon you'll stand before him whose eyes are as a flame of fire. In that day, "whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light and what you have spoken in the ear, Jesus said, in inner rooms, will be proclaimed upon the housetops," Luke 12:3.

You may not believe *now* that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. You may not believe *now* that the soul who sins must die, that the wages of sin is death. You may not believe *now* that whoever keeps the whole law yet offends in one point is guilty of all. You may not believe *now* that all we like sheep have gone astray, we've turned everyone to his own way, that there is none righteous, no not one. You may not believe *now* that it is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment. You may not believe *now* that Jesus spoke the truth when he said, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." **But you will believe it then.** In that day, you'll be like those kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man who hide themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, saying to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits upon the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb for the great day of his wrath has come and who is able to stand?"

But friend, there's no need for you to endure the wrath of a holy God, for his love for lost sinners was so great that he provided a way of redemption for you, a way for you to be forgiven, a way for you to be restored. What did he do? He loved you so much he sent his only dear Son into this world. He kept that law that you've broken and then he went to the cross and he paid that price that you owe. He said, in effect, "Father, punish me and let them go free. Pour your wrath upon me and let my sheep, my bride, my church, my own, let them go free." And now God says, "If you'll but repent of your sins," that means be sorry in your heart, recognize them as vile, turn from them in disgust and lay hold upon Jesus Christ alone as your only possible Savior from sin, all of your sins will be forgiven. God will grant you everlasting life. He'll adopt you into his forever family.

You'll be forgiven. You'll be cleansed. And wonder-of-wonders, not only will all your sins be forgiven, not only will you now have everlasting life, but you will become a

“partaker of God's holiness,” Hebrews 12:10. You'll be a partaker of God's holiness. Now, it won't be complete, that process, until you're in his very presence. But right here, right now, the Holy Spirit will indwell you and you'll be a partaker of God's holiness. Fallen creatures are forgiven and restored to the point that they partake of the holiness of God. What an amazing truth. To God be the glory. Great things he has done.

Let's pray.

*O Lord, it is a glorious thing you've done. Not only did you find a way to redeem us but you implant your Holy Spirit within us and you give us a hatred for sin and a love of holiness and you begin to change us from the inside out. You sanctify us, and one day you're going to glorify us. Lord, it's an incredible thing. It's an amazing thing. And how we praise you for it.*

*Lord, if there be someone here this day still dead in sins, O Father, have compassion upon that one, have mercy upon that soul, draw that man or woman, boy or girl, to true saving faith. Lord, may he or she cry out, “God, be merciful to me a sinner. God, forgive me. God, save me.” We ask it in Christ's name. Amen.*