

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

PROCLAIMING
the PERFECTIONS
of GOD

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“I AM THE LORD”:
THE ONLY GOD

- R. C. Sproul -

AS WE BEGIN OUR CONSIDERATION OF THE HOLINESS OF GOD, I would like to examine a brief portion of the book of Isaiah—but it is not from Isaiah 6, from which I have often taught about God’s holiness. I want to look instead at Isaiah 45:1–8:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: “I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I am

the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God. I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; and let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it.”

This is one of the strangest texts we find anywhere in sacred Scripture. It is a message of divine revelation from God to a man by the name of Cyrus, who was not yet alive when this message was given. At the time of this prophecy, Israel was in the midst of its Babylonian captivity, subjugated by the most powerful empire on the face of the earth. But the message in this text is not addressed to someone from Babylon. It is addressed to a future king of the Persian/Median Empire, who would defeat the Babylonians and ultimately liberate the people of Israel to return to their homeland.

In this passage, God begins by saying that He is speaking “to his anointed, to Cyrus.” This verse scandalized the Jewish people, who were astonished that God would call a future Gentile king His “anointed.” Nowhere else in Scripture do we find this title used for anyone outside of Israel.

What follows is hardly less astonishing. God says to Cyrus: “Thus says the LORD to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: ‘I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places’ (vv. 1–3a). In effect, God is saying: “I am the Lord God. I have anointed you and I will go before you. I will give you the power in your armies to lay waste to the strongholds that rule the world right

now. I will take your right arm in My right arm. I will break the bars and the bronze shields. I will give you treasures.” The list of things God vows to do goes on and on.

Why is God going to do this? He tells Cyrus plainly: “That you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me” (vv. 3b–4). In other words, God says: “I am going to do this, Cyrus, so that you may know who I am, that you may know that I am the Lord God of Israel. But ultimately, this will be not just for your sake, but for the sake of My people, Israel.”

John Calvin, the great theologian of the Protestant Reformation, once made a comment that I appreciate: “Let us, I say, allow the Christian to unlock his mind and ears to all the words of God which are addressed to him, provided he do it with this moderation—viz. that whenever the Lord shuts [His] sacred mouth, he also desists from inquiry.”¹ That was Calvin’s warning against unbridled speculations about the truth of God. But in spite of the influence that warning has had on my life, I can’t resist a few speculations here. So with my apologies to the magisterial Reformer John Calvin, I will speculate for a second.

I try to imagine what might have gone through Cyrus’ mind when he heard this prophecy for the first time, particularly when we get to the refrain that occurs three times in this chapter: “I am the LORD, and there is no other” (vv. 5a, 6b, 18b). I picture Cyrus hearing these words from this foreign deity, who declares that He is the Lord and that He would like to have a word with Cyrus. Perhaps this Gentile king thought to himself: “Oh, Yahweh . . . yes, he’s the Lord of Israel. But I am Cyrus, lord of Persia. So I suppose this deity of Israel would like to have a summit meeting with me so the two of us can sit down and plan my future military campaign.”

Maybe that is what Cyrus thought at first. But God didn’t allow him to hold that thought, adding, “besides me there is no God” (v. 5b). Does

that sound familiar to you? Do you recall hearing anything like that from the pen of Moses? How about Exodus 20:2–3: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me”?

These declarations from God to Cyrus affirm the uniqueness of God. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to consider briefly what is unique about the God of the Bible.

Negation and Eminence

The term *holy* has two common references. The first and primary meaning of the term refers to God’s otherness—the sense in which He is different from everything else in the created universe. The secondary meaning has to do with His purity, His perfection in righteousness, which we contemplate regularly. In that sense, holiness is a communicable attribute. We know this is so because He says, “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). But holiness cannot be a communicable attribute in its primary meaning, for it describes something about God that you and I cannot possess in this world or the world to come. It refers to His transcendent, divine nature, the sense in which He is “other” from us.

In systematic theology, when we try to set forth our doctrine of God and detail the attributes of God, we struggle with the limitations of human language. Historically, the theologians of the church have relied on three distinct methods to describe the being and character of God. One of the most common methods, and certainly the favorite one employed by Augustine, is what we call the *via negationis* or *via negativa*—the “way of negation.” Quite simply, the way of negation defines something by saying what it is not.

There are several ways we use this method in theology. I’ll just mention two of them in passing. First, when we talk about God, we say that He is infinite. That simply means that God is “not finite.” We are finite, and to be finite is to have boundaries. There is an edge, a limit, to the

sphere in which we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). We can be in only one place at a time. But God is not bound by the borders of creatureliness. He is not finite. He is infinite. If we sent spacecraft to probe the deepest places of the universe, no matter how far we went, we would not reach the end of God, because there is no end to a being who is infinite.

A second way in which we use the way of negation to describe God is with the term *immutable*. When we say that God is immutable, we simply mean that He is “not mutable.” Nothing defines creaturely existence more directly than the phenomenon of change. Since you picked up this book and began to read it, you have changed. The change may be imperceptible, but if nothing else you are a few minutes older. You have changed, because that is the defining attribute of all created objects and creatures. We live in a world that is constantly changing, but we cannot apply that category to God. He is the same today as He was yesterday and will be tomorrow. One of the most comforting concepts in all of sacred Scripture about the character and the nature of God is that He is immutable—He is not subject to change in His person or in His behavior, that is, His very being.

Another common way we define God is by what is called the *via eminentia*, or “way of eminence.” That is, we take normal, human, earthly categories and exalt them to the “nth” degree. For instance, we say that one of the things that we possess as human beings is the capacity to learn, to accumulate knowledge. The contributors to this book are extraordinarily knowledgeable men, but none of them has all knowledge. In other words, we possess elements of science, but God possesses all science or omniscience. In a similar way, we all experience the exercise of power at a creaturely level. Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the manifestation, for example, of the power of nature, such as when earthquakes strike developing countries. We see the power of a tsunami or of a volcanic eruption. The inventions of human power, such as the atomic bomb, boggle the mind. These things are potent in human terms, but they are popguns compared to the power

of God, who is all potent or omnipotent. The attribute of omnipotence defines God because only God has all power. He is unique in these ways. “I am the LORD, there is no other.”

Affirmations of Uniqueness

In addition to the way of negation and the way of eminence, there is the *via affirmativa*, the “way of affirmation.” Again, I’ll give you just two illustrations to show how we use this method to define the uniqueness of the holy God. We use it when we say that God, and God alone, is “self-existent” and “eternal.” These affirmations take us to the extreme edges of our ability to comprehend who God is.

Of all the theological terms that have been used to describe God in the theological tomes of history, one sends chills up and down my spine so strongly that I can hardly write it on the chalkboard in the classroom without becoming overwhelmed. It is the word *aseity*. If there is any word in the English language that captures the otherness of God, it is the word *aseity*. It means “self-existence.” God, and God alone, has the power of being in and of Himself.

When NASA first launched the Hubble Space Telescope, I heard a comment by a famous astrophysicist whose name you would recognize. He said, “I’m excited about the launch of the Hubble Telescope because we are going to learn all kinds of things about the origins of the universe, which exploded into being some twelve to eighteen billion years ago.” I was driving when I heard these comments on the radio, and I almost lost it. My hands came right off the wheel. I simply could not believe this eminent scientist had said that the universe had “exploded into being.” What was it before it exploded into being? In historic categories, being is the antithesis of nonbeing, and nonbeing is a synonym for nothing.

What is nothing? In all my years of philosophical inquiry, I never found an adequate definition of nothing—until R. C. Jr. went to junior high school. That was when I finally came to an understanding of its meaning.

It turned out that nothing was what he did in school everyday. He'd come home and I'd say, “What did you do in school today?” and he would say, “Nothing.”

Nothing is so obviously the absence of something that philosophers cannot even talk about what it is, only about what it is not. But in the most basic categories, nothing is the absence of being. As I've said until my congregation is tired of hearing it, if there ever were a time when nothing at all existed, what could possibly exist now? Nothing. But if something exists now, that tells you indisputably that there *never* was a time when there was nothing—not twelve billion years ago, not eighteen billion years ago, not eighteen *trillion* years ago.

Everything that we know of, including the universe itself, had a beginning, which means it is contingent, derived, dependent on something outside of itself to lend being to it—except for God. God was not created. There was never a time when He was not. He derived His being not from something before Him or something outside of Him but from Himself. He has the power of being in and of Himself. I wish everybody had a chance to delve into the depths of the inquiries of Western philosophy to explore the concept of being, because there is nothing more profound to say about God than that which He says about Himself when He reveals Himself by the name “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14).

This was the message God communicated to Cyrus when He said, “I am the LORD, and there is no other.” He was saying: “I alone, Cyrus, have the power of being within myself. Apart from Me, Cyrus, you couldn't exist for a second. You couldn't possibly live apart from My being, because it is in Me that you live and move and have your being. I am the LORD; there is no other.”

Ontologically and Logically Necessary

Thomas Aquinas bequeathed to the Western world all kinds of well-known arguments for the existence of God, some of which have been

blatantly ignored by modern evangelicals—to their impoverishment. But I think the most compelling argument was, first of all, the *ens necessarium*, the idea that God possesses “necessary being.” He alone has being that is necessary. What in the world does that mean? Perhaps I should ask, “What *beyond* the world does that mean?” because there is nothing on this planet or in this universe apart from God that possesses necessary being.

We can define necessary being in two ways, ontologically and logically. Aquinas argued for both. Ontology is the study of being or the science of being, so when Aquinas said that God has necessary being, he was saying that God is the kind of being who cannot possibly *not* be. God is who He is from everlasting to everlasting, and He cannot be anything other than what He is. If He could be something other than what He is, He would have to change, and if He changed, He would stop being God.

One of my favorite hymns is “And Can It Be That I Should Gain” by Charles Wesley. I love that hymn, except for one small part. The refrain asks the question, “How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?” Charles Wesley, shame on you. Do you really mean to say that God died on the cross? How could God suffer an end to His being? If the being of God had perished on the cross, the cross would have perished with Him. The hill outside of Jerusalem would have been vaporized and Jerusalem would have vanished along with the whole of creation, because apart from the being of God, nothing can exist for a split second. No, God did not die. The God-man died. The God who took on Himself a human nature died in His humanity, but the deity did not perish on the cross. To speak of God dying may sound great in Wesley’s hymn, but it’s a ghastly thought, because God has necessary being, which cannot stop being. He is ontologically necessary.

But what has been almost completely lost in our day is the truth that His being is not only ontologically necessary, it is logically necessary. There is no reason that I can offer why R. C. Sproul should exist. There was a time when I didn’t exist. There was a time when you didn’t exist.

Neither you nor I can claim any logical necessity for our existence. But not only is God ontologically necessary, you have to take leave of reason, park your rationality in the parking lot, and deposit your scientific certainty there as soon as you begin to explore the idea that God does not exist. You have to stop thinking logically to argue that the universe came into being by itself, out of nothing. When you talk like that, in the name of science, you've just traded in science for ignorance and nonsense. Nothing could be more irrational than the idea that something comes from nothing.

I once read an article by a Nobel prize-winning physicist, who said that the time had come to give up the ancient idea that we can explain the origin of the universe through spontaneous generation. Through scientific investigation, he said, we now know that things cannot come out of nothing spontaneously. But he went on to say: "For something to come into being out of nothing requires time. You can't get something out of nothing quickly. You have to have patience. You have to wait on it." This is an act of pulling a rabbit out of a hat—without a rabbit, without a hat, and without a magician. That's not science, that's nonsense. That's mythology. Logic demands that if something exists now, something has always existed, or you have to choose an irrational alternative. That is what Aquinas was getting at. God not only has ontologically necessary being, He has logically necessary being.

Well-being and Calamity

While this is a brief portrait of who God is, as He presented Himself to Cyrus, I want us to consider what God does. He says: "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none beside me; I am the LORD and there is no other" (vv. 5–6). Then comes verse 7: "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things."

This verse has created problems for people who rely on the King James Version, which translates the verse this way: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.” You can see the difficulty here. I’ve had many students come to me with their KJV Bibles and say: “You teach us that the biblical *a priori* is that God is not the author of evil, and yet, here it is, right in my Bible: ‘I am the LORD. . . . I create evil.’”

When that happens, I explain that we can look at this text in terms of the words employed or we can look at it in terms of the poetic structure of the passage, which happens to be a case of parallelism, a common Jewish literary form. In this case, it’s antithetical parallelism. God makes light and God makes darkness. God brings prosperity and God brings evil. The terms are antithetical. They are opposites.

The Hebrew word that is translated as “calamity” in the English Standard Version and as “evil” in the King James has a multitude of meanings, stretching all the way from food that tastes nasty to full-orbed moral evil. In this case, the parallelism and the context indicate that God is saying: “Cyrus, I am the Lord. There is no other. I form the light. I bring the darkness. I bring well-being. I create calamity.”

Immediately after the devastating terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, bumper stickers appeared saying, “God bless America.” At the same time, it seemed as if everyone in the world asked me as a theologian, “Where was God on 9/11?” I said: “He was in the same place he was on 9/10 and on 9/12. He didn’t move.” They would then ask, “How can God allow these things to happen?” Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell unwisely said that the destruction the terrorists wreaked was the judgment of God on the United States. The hue and cry of the people of this country and the news media was so severe that Robertson and Falwell recanted their statements. It was unthinkable to the American people that God could have had anything to do with that calamity. We are a people who believe that God can bless a nation, but we refuse to accept the idea that God can judge a nation.

The reason for that dichotomy, I believe, is that we don't know who God is. The God of popular religion is not holy. He is not the God who is introduced here in Isaiah, the God who brings the bull market and the bear market, who raises up kings and brings them down.

The two books that I have written that have received the most response are *The Holiness of God* and *Chosen by God*. Many people have said to me: “You know, your book *The Holiness of God* just blew me away. It gave me an exalted view of the majesty of God. Then I read *Chosen by God*, but I didn't like that one at all.”

When I get those comments, I usually say: “Either you didn't understand *The Holiness of God* or you didn't understand *Chosen by God*. The God who is holy is the God who is sovereign. The God who is transcendent in His majesty is the omnipotent Lord. He brings good things and He brings bad things.” Job understood that when he said, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21b).

This is the God with whom we have to deal—whether we like Him or not. He is God, He alone. That is what He said to Cyrus: “I am the LORD.” You might prefer a different god. You might even try to fashion one. But there is no other.

Note

- 1 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, revised edition (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 3.21.3.