

God's Zeal for His Name

By Jay Wegter

For over a century the theory of evolution has been taught in the academy as if it were empirical science, when actually it is an unproven religious philosophy. This has done much to erode biblical theism. No longer is God's relation to His creation (as *Maker, Owner, Upholder, Ruler, and Definer*) the heart of the West's worldview. As a consequence of seeking a natural or material cause for everything, much of the Western world has become completely blind to what we owe God as His very image and likeness.

But God's relation to the universe (and to us His creatures) has not changed. God created all things for His glory, and He will surely gain this goal of having His works magnify Him. Human rebellion cannot, and will not thwart His purpose. The Lord of hosts is zealous for His Name. His 'Name' is the sum of His perfections, excellence, and majesty expressed by His reputation among men and angels. "For Thou hast magnified Thy Word according to all Thy Name" (Ps 138:2).

God's zeal for His Name is seen in His acts of redemption, providence, and judgment (in both mercy and justice). But mass culture is intent on extinguishing this all-important truth from our consciousness. One hundred years of secular humanism, Darwinism, and psychology have given our culture a totally man-centered worldview. Therefore, not surprisingly, men are incredulous, even scandalized when they hear the biblical fact that God uses people for His purposes and not the other way around.

Pharaoh was raised up by God so that through that ruler's obstinate response, the reputation of God's power might be proclaimed (Rom 9:17). God uses people for His own purposes, but He can never misuse them because He is holy. Indeed, every human being will ultimately exist as an object lesson to the rational universe (the holy angels) of either divine justice or divine mercy (Rom 9:20-24).

What we owe God by virtue of being created in His moral image means that there is a gravitas to life that is weighty beyond words (because God is holy, we live in a moral universe—all of life is ethical). Every single person has a relationship with God of either alienation from Him, or reconciliation to Him. "*Remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col 1:21-22).

At the moment of our death our eternal destiny is fixed; we will bear that relationship to God (of alienation or reconciliation) forever. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn 3:36). "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am *He*, you

will die in your sins” (Jn 8:24). “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:20-21).

God commands all men to seek Him by means of His Word. “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Is 55:6-7). “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*” (Is 45:22-23).

Therefore, this entire dichotomy between final destinies (being an object of divine justice or divine mercy—of being a vessel of honor, or a vessel of wrath) is not a sidebar issue—it is central to the whole movement of human history as well as its final consummation.

In order to graphically illustrate this, consider the phrase “and then they will know that I am the Lord.” It is used around fifty times in the book of Ezekiel—and in the vast majority of those cases, the individual comes to ‘know who God is’ by means of experiencing crushing judgment and eternal condemnation. This is shocking and even insulting to modern men—namely that God would vindicate His holy Name and avenge His honor over the dead bodies and eternal torment of the wicked.

But countless churches today that go by the name “Christian” are afraid to preach these truths concerning the consequences of sin lest their congregations be offended and their attendance be decimated. Warning transgressors about what awaits them if they remain impenitent has become passé in so many of our evangelical pulpits today. But Scripture is a mighty corrective to our squeamishness concerning the proclamation of divine justice.

Consider for a moment the following passages: “On the other hand I am filled with power—with the Spirit of the LORD—and with justice and courage to make known to Jacob his rebellious act, even to Israel his sin” (Mic 3:8). “Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins” (Is 58:1). “Your prophets have seen for you false and foolish *visions*; and they have not exposed your iniquity so as to restore you from captivity, but they have seen for you false and misleading oracles” (Lam 2:14).

A Christian leader once shared with me in private, “The difference between a false teacher and a true teacher can be very subtle. It often comes down to this alone: the false teacher does not warn.” When God allows false teachers to proliferate, it is always an indicator of divine judgment.

Conviction of sin and repentance from personal sin are only possible when we take God’s side against our iniquity and say the same thing about it that He does: namely that it is abominable; it defiles; it is idolatry, it enslaves; it degrades us; it separates us from Him; and it justly calls for His wrath against us.

“Any sin is more or less heinous depending upon the honor and majesty of the one whom we had offended. Since God is of infinite honor, infinite majesty, and infinite holiness, the slightest sin is of infinite consequence. The slightest sin is nothing less than cosmic treason when we realize against whom we have sinned” (Jonathan Edwards). “What are we saying to our Creator when we disobey Him at the slightest point? We are saying ‘no’ to the righteousness of God. We are saying, “God, Your law is not good. My judgment is better than Yours. Your authority does not apply to me. I am above and beyond Your jurisdiction. I have the right to do what I want to do, not what You command me to *do*” (R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*).

Therefore it is tragic and tantamount to spiritual suicide to imagine that God takes the sinner’s own view of his transgressions. Yet, this author sees a disturbing trend. I am increasingly discovering in my evangelistic conversations that—what the Bible calls sin is regarded as merely evidence of human imperfection, or justifiable actions issuing from felt needs or survival instincts.

On the contrary, the Lord places under bright light the truth that the iniquity which separates us from Him will be exposed to comprehensive judgment. “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal 6:7-8). “Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:21-23).

The old southern preacher titled his message from Romans chapter six, “Payday someday.” God cannot be mocked; the sowing and reaping principle is ineffable. This makes the grace of God in Christ infinitely precious. To fear God is to hate evil and to turn from it. “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate” (Prov 8:13).

How farfetched these biblical truths appear to the postmodern mindset—that eternal judgment is intimately connected with God’s infinite respect for His Name. What we see today is willful ignorance of the holy character of God, namely that all sin is against Him personally (Ps 51:4). Since we are created to reflect and showcase His moral majesty, all transgression is a gross misrepresentation of God. Thus, when God speaks of His zeal for His Name, contained in that concept is the reality that God’s righteousness is His passionate commitment to the reputation of His Name.

What a startling thought it is that God will ‘clear His own Name’ by means of the damnation of impenitent sinners. “Thus My anger will be spent and I will satisfy My wrath on them, and I will be appeased; then they will know that I, the LORD, have spoken in My zeal when I have spent My wrath upon them” (Ezek 5:13).

“Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, declares, ‘Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries and avenge Myself on My foes’” (Is 1:24). “Shall I not punish these

people,” declares the LORD, “And on a nation such as this shall I not avenge Myself?” (Jer 5:9).

Now in the Western world, a whole generation of spiritually profane individuals has arisen. The false god of their imaginings is domesticated, toothless, and benign. There is nothing about him that inspires reverential fear and awe and quaking nor an urgency in repentance.

It was R. C. Sproul whose comments on this spiritual declension are so poignant, “The failure of modern evangelicalism is the failure to understand the holiness of God.” “At its root holiness means separation, to be set apart. Because we are unholy, our normal reaction to a holy God is fear, dread or revulsion. [States Sproul,] ‘Holiness provokes hatred. . . the greater the holiness, the greater the human hostility toward it.’ Jesus knew all about this. Even though perfect in his love, people rejected him. Says Sproul, ‘His love was a perfect love, a transcendent and holy love, but His very love brought trauma to people. This kind of love is so majestic we can’t stand it.’ Indeed, in the end, the enraged mobs put Jesus to a cruel death. The real Jesus they could not stand” (Bill Muelhlenberg, “A Review of *The Holiness of God*, by R. C. Sproul”).

“If we listed ten descriptions of the church today, I don’t think the term holy would appear. If we listed the top 50 sermon topics in our churches, I don’t think the holiness of God would be among them. Sproul is quite right to say this theme [of God’s holiness] ‘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.’ He reminds us that the first petition in the Lord’s Prayer is ‘hallowed be your name’” (Ibid.).

Against this backdrop of willful ignorance of the holiness of God, consider the message that is being sent by so many seeker/designer churches today: *Come as you are; bring your lifestyle into the church. Reverence is optional. It’s ok to shuffle in late—wearing your flip flops and holding your latte. Your physical body is your personal canvas for expression—pierce it, tattoo it, and pleasure it—grace will cover all. And, by all means don’t sweat anything because grace means God is an accepting deity.*

By bringing so much of hipster culture into what we call ‘seeker’ or ‘designer’ churches, the message inferred is that the divine is adaptable, like a nose of wax that can be shaped to our liking. We could summarize this cultural “Christianity” life view as sending the message that God (like the designer church itself) will conform Himself to you in order to win your loyalty. How opposite is the truth of Holy Scripture! “God will hear and answer them—even the one who sits enthroned from of old—**with whom there is no change**, and who do not fear God” (Ps 55:19).

Let’s bring this into perspective in view of current challenges to the church. If evangelicalism continues to move toward a cultural, rather than biblical Christianity, then the loss of the knowledge of God who is transcendent in holiness is where it is ultimately headed. That is terrifying to have a form of religion which uses gospel terms, but worships a mutable god. Biblical repentance means that we understand that the one true God does not change—we are the ones who **must be changed** (by regeneration) and **must change** (by repentance), and **have our status before God changed** (by justification), or we will remain His adversaries.

By shoving the knowledge of the divine through the grid of self-love, seeker churches have fashioned a god who is merely a large version of the sinner. So deeply does this self-love run, it is increasingly common to hear statements like this: “Your God is vengeful, spiteful, mean, but my god is forgiving and compassionate.”

Perhaps without actually intending to do so, seeker churches are painting God’s holiness, sovereignty, and transcendence into a corner until only His communicable attributes remain. David Wells warns that if this trend continues, one day we will wake up and discover that we have been worshipping ourselves instead of God.

Says Wells, “With God relegated to the outer margins, the ear-tickling request becomes, ‘tell us about self.’ Once God is excluded from reality religion may be nothing more than a fascination with our selves. How terrifying a possibility it is that the immanent may completely replace the transcendent. When the imminent alone is remaining, and it is psychologized, God’s reality becomes no different than our own! He is there to satisfy our needs. He has no real authority. Ultimately, He bores us (David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, pp. 90-91).

“In the culture of modernity, the stress is put on image, not character. The boundary between God and self becomes fuzzy. An encounter with God does not depend upon a truth-based belief and idea, but upon an inward experience. In narcissistic culture, God is in the image of self; He is internalized” (Ibid, pp. 99-100).

David Wells exposes the rotten underpinnings of narcissistic Christianity: “The Church is enfeebled because it has lost the sense of God’s holiness and sovereignty. God rests too inconsequentially upon the Church—His truth is too distant, the gospel too easy, Christ too common. Divine transcendence has been abandoned for immanence” (David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, introduction). “People remain at the center of their lives. They are rigidly loyal to self; they are the architects of their future. They avoid coming face to face with God and His truth. Sinners in the culture of modernity can no longer gauge the depth of their sin, even when tormented by conscience” (Ibid, p. 53).

When the yearnings of self-love shape the standard for behavior, the fear of God dries up. We now live in a generation in which men and women are proving by their lives and worldviews that they follow the prince of this world—for they have subscribed to his wager that God is not zealous for His Name, and that He is not as good as His threats and His promises. How we need the pulpit emphasis of former days when preachers proclaimed so clearly that the Law of God is the avenger of God’s holiness and that the sinner is a fugitive on the run about to be apprehended and sentenced. Those ministers imbued their listeners with a sense of urgency, “Flee for your lives! Flee to Christ. He alone is the city of refuge for sinners.”

As the apostle Paul states, “Therefore, I testify to you this day that **I am innocent of the blood of all men**. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:26-27). The preaching of God’s holiness must be accompanied by the proclamation of His sovereignty and transcendence—for He has the infinite might to accomplish all of the plans of His heart. Thus, it is fitting to let our hearers know the following:

God does not dwell in time, yet He knows you moment by moment. God has decreed all

things, yet He has given you moral free agency—your decisions have temporal and eternal significance. God exerts sovereign control at the astronomical level and also at the sub-atomic level—there are no truant particles—autonomy from Him is utterly impossible. God exercises the total freedom to choose His objects of mercy. Thus, you will not turn to Him unless He turns you—yet you are responsible to turn to Him. God is so vast He knows every contingency of every potential decision infinitely. God is so majestic and you are so small that you need God to find God. In order to know God aright, our insignificance and finitude must come face to face with His majesty. Calvin said it well, “Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God... Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God” (John Calvin).

That God’s throne is higher than every other throne signifies God’s superior power to exercise His authority. No opposing authority can nullify the decrees of God. What God purposes, God accomplishes. In Isaiah 46:10, God emphatically states: “*My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all My purpose.*” Daniel 4:35: “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand. To be gripped by the sovereign omnipotence of God is either **marvelous** because He is for us — or it is **terrifying** because He is against us. Indifference to God’s omnipotence simply means we haven’t seen it for what it is. The sovereign authoritative power of the living God is a refuge full of joy and delight for those who have been gripped by the gospel, which is His new covenant promise of love, mercy, and forgiveness (Gregg Caruso).

So how will we put into practice our growing knowledge of God’s zeal for His Name? First of all, it will fill us with overflowing gratitude that salvation in Christ puts us right with God’s righteousness. “So in love is Christ with holiness that he will buy it with his blood for us” (John Flavel). Second, we will regard Christ’s rightful loving ownership and rule over us as our greatest privilege. “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” (R. C. Sproul). Third, we will marvel and will adore God Almighty that He has bound up together His glory and our eternal good. For in Christ these two are joined forever. Says Edwards,

Because [God] infinitely values his own glory, consisting in the knowledge of himself, love to himself . . . *joy in himself*; he therefore valued the image, communication or participation of these, in the creature. And it is because he values himself, that he delights in the knowledge, and love, and joy of the creature; as being himself the object of this knowledge, love and complacence...[Thus] God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at, is happiness in union with himself (Jonathan Edwards, *The Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Ramsey, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989, pp. 532-533 in John Piper, “A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: Why We Need Jonathan Edwards 300 Years Later”).