

JOHN PIPER

RELEASING  
THE BIBLE  
SUPERNATURALLY

2 CORINTHIANS 4:17-5:12

shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

For we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing glory may be made manifest to all. For as it is, so it will be: though our vessels are crushed, perished, battered, or broken; yet we do not despair, because our inward life is concealed. For we are not destroyed; always we are carrying about in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

FOR WE KNOW that the tent that we have on earth is a house that we have built from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling; if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for the things he has done in the body, whether good or bad. We are confident, therefore, inasmuch as we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For we are not ashamed, though we are in such a condition, because we know that if our earthly house is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For we are not ashamed, though we are in such a condition, because we know that if our earthly house is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

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2 CORINTHIANS 5:13-6:14

who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are blameless outside, it is for God; if we are in our right minds inside, it is for you. We are like the clay jars that are made to hold treasure, so that the light of the glory of Christ may be made manifest to all. For as it is, so it will be: though our vessels are crushed, perished, battered, or broken; yet we do not despair, because our inward life is concealed. For we are not destroyed; always we are carrying about in our bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him now no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be of one mind with us, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6 WHO ARE TOGETHER with him, therefore, appeal to you not in the face of God but in the face of Christ.

"In a favor, I have listened to you, and in my heart I have been glad."

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our preaching, though we are as clay jars. We commend ourselves in every way: in great trials, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger, by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are honest and impenitent; and yet are true; as unknown, yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Do not let our honesty be as a cloak of shame, a cover-up for our greed, or as a pretense of knowledge, as if we were wise. No, we speak the truth in love, growing in all that we say, and in all that we do, as we are approved by you. We are not ashamed, though we are in such a condition, because we know that if our earthly house is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

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Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture

“Not many books should be recommended for both beginning Bible readers and mature Bible readers, but this is one of them. Utilizing brief and pointed expositions of often overlooked Bible verses, John Piper helpfully explains why we should be reading the Bible, the work of the Spirit in our Bible reading, and the fundamental skills and habits of faithful Bible reading. I cannot imagine a serious Christian who would not benefit from a thoughtful reading of this book.”

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“Stunning. Profound. Powerful. *Reading the Bible Supernaturally* will move you to captivated and awestruck worship at the Divine’s plan for his Word as an instrument to magnify his unrivaled glory. Seeing and savoring the God of the Scriptures is an extraordinarily high calling every believer must pursue, and no man can move us to that place quite like John Piper. This book, accessibly written and weighty in content, is so much more than a manual or study guide to the Scriptures. Rather, it’s an invitation to the experience God intended we have with his Word—an experience that is Spirit dependent, faith building, and worship inciting.”

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“*Reading the Bible Supernaturally* reminds us why we cannot rest until every person on earth has access to the Bible in their own tongue. Tribes, languages, peoples, and nations are perishing without access to, or opportunity to know, this glorious God through this glorious book. John Piper stokes the urgency of our calling as the church of Jesus Christ to deepen our appreciation for the Word that God uses toward a missional end—his global and eternal glory.”

**Michael Oh**, Global Executive Director, the Lausanne Movement

“*Reading the Bible Supernaturally* is a thorough and compelling wake-up call to lethargic, passive, resistant, mechanical Bible readers (which is all of us at one point or another) to become hungry, eager, inquisitive, aggressively observant miners for the treasure in the text—fully expectant that God will bring us from death to life, from foolishness to wisdom, from damning despair to glorious hope through his Word.”

**Nancy Guthrie**, Bible teacher; author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament*  
Bible study series

“If you disconnect the Bible from God’s glory, you lose your grip on both. What terrible things we hear people say about each of them, taken in isolation. John Piper puts them together, and finds himself preaching an astonishingly high doctrine of Scripture, right alongside an intimately experiential doctrine of God’s glory. *Reading the Bible Supernaturally* is not just one of the helpful activities that make up the Christian life. Kept in proper context, seen in full perspective, and received in wide-awake recognition of the living voice of the triune God, reading the Bible is the central act of Christian existence. This book, a kind of extended Christian hedonist gloss on Psalm 119, is an invitation to the miracle of Bible reading.”

**Fred Sanders**, Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University; author, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*

“No book has inspired me to approach Scripture with as much anticipation as *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*. Read this book at your own risk, for it will ignite your devotional life. You will find yourself actively hunting for treasure in the Bible, looking carefully at each passage, praying and trusting that God himself will open your eyes to see and savor his glory. Don’t let the length of this book fool you; it is clear, accessible, and inspiring. In fact, it is the most practical, passionate, and motivating book on reading the Bible I have ever read. Read it. Apply it. Test it. It will transform your approach to God’s Word.”

**Vaneetha Rendall Risner**, author, *The Scars That Have Shaped Me*

“Having read *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, readers will not return to Scripture carelessly or indifferently but with renewed and stimulated appetite to meet with the God of glory who inspired it and can be found and freshly encountered through its pages. John Piper’s own insatiable appetite for fellowship with God communicates inspiringly.”

**Terry Virgo**, Founder, Newfrontiers

*Reading the Bible Supernaturally*



# Reading the Bible Supernaturally

*Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*

John Piper

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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To  
all who have helped me see  
the light of the glory of God in Scripture,  
a legacy of shared illumination



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Spiritually to understand the Scripture, is to have the eyes of the mind opened, to behold the wonderful spiritual excellency of the glorious things contained in the true meaning of it, and that always were contained in it, ever since it was written; to behold the amiable and bright manifestations of the divine perfections, and of the excellency and sufficiency of Christ, and the excellency and suitability of the way of salvation by Christ, and the spiritual glory of the precepts and promises of the Scripture, etc. Which things are, and always were in the Bible, and would have been seen before, if it had not been for blindness, without having any new sense added by the words being sent by God to a particular person, and spoken anew to him, with a new meaning.<sup>1</sup>

JONATHAN EDWARDS

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1. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith and Harry S. Stout, rev. ed., vol. 2, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 281.

## Preface

To write a book that you hope will help others see more of God in the Christian Scriptures is to acknowledge that God intends that a reader of his word understand it and enjoy it with the help of others. Writing books, teaching lessons, preaching sermons, raising children “in the instruction of the Lord”—all of these imply that God has planned for us to understand the Bible with the help of human teachers. Another way to say it is that God reveals more of himself through his word when it is read in community than he does when it is read in isolation.

The New Testament shows repeatedly that Jesus Christ gives teachers to his church “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). Those teachers do not replace the Bible as God’s inspired word. They help us understand it. In fact, the aim of human teachers is to help all believers grow to the point of being teachers themselves—not necessarily in an official capacity, but at least having the ability to use the word of God for both oneself and others.

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. (Heb. 5:12–13)

Therefore, I see myself, and this book, as one small part of God’s unfathomably complex matrix of influences that make up the Christian community of discovery and illumination. Therefore, nothing in this book should be construed to imply that its aim is to produce isolated Bible readers. It is a stone tossed into a pool of people. Its ripple effect, if any, will flow through relationships. Its aim is to be part of God’s global

purpose to create a beautiful bride for his Son—“the church . . . in splendor, without spot or wrinkle . . . holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). The beauty of that bride consists largely in the humble, holy, happy, loving way Christians treat each other. If the *end* is corporate glory, we should not be surprised that the *means* is corporate growth. We read the word together; we reach the end together.

God has used hundreds of people to help me understand and love the Bible. I would like to help you—so you can help others. This is as it should be: a legacy of shared illumination until God’s purposes for the church and the world are complete. May God turn your own ripple into a wave of blessing for the few that you know, and the thousands you don’t. I am praying to this end.



The gospel of the blessed God does not go abroad a-begging for its evidence, so much as some think: it has its highest and most proper evidence in itself. . . . The mind ascends to the truth of the gospel but by one step, and that is its divine glory.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Those who are under the power of their natural darkness and blindness . . . cannot see or discern that divine excellency in the Scripture, without an apprehension whereof no man can believe it aright to be the word of God.

JOHN OWEN

# Introduction

This is a book about what it means to read the Bible supernaturally. I know that sounds strange. If there is anything obvious about you and me, it is that we are natural, ordinary, finite, mortal. We are not angels or demons; and we are certainly not God. But if the Bible is what it claims to be—namely, inspired by God—then it has a supernatural origin. And what I will try to show is that such a book calls for more than your natural kind of reading. Not less. But more. In fact, it calls for the very best of natural reading. But also for more—something beyond what is merely human.

As with all strange-sounding claims, there is a backstory. I tried to write this book a year ago, but within a matter of days, another book pushed its way into my mind and demanded to be written first. So I postponed this one and wrote *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness*.<sup>1</sup> The question “Is the Bible true?” begged to be answered first.

In a sense, this is backward. Surely you must read a book before you can decide whether it’s true. So shouldn’t a book about how to read the Bible *precede* a book about its truthfulness? Maybe. But in my case, the discoveries I made writing *A Peculiar Glory* proved essential for the way this book is written. The way the Bible shows itself to be true and completely trustworthy carries indispensable implications for how to read it. This has become much clearer to me through writing *A Peculiar Glory* first.

You don’t have to read *A Peculiar Glory* in order to understand this book. But it will clarify what I am doing in this book if you know

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1. *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

how that book argues for the truth of the Bible. So I'll give a summary. The point of that first book, which shapes this one throughout, is that the Bible reveals its complete truthfulness by the shining forth of a self-authenticating, peculiar, divine glory. That too may sound strange. But it may not seem as strange if you compare that kind of argument with several others in the Bible of the same kind.

### **The Glory of God Authenticates the Creator**

For example, how does the Bible expect all humans to know that God exists, and that he is all-powerful and generous, and should be thanked and glorified? Not many questions, if any, are more important than this. The answer is that the Bible expects all humans to see the self-authenticating glory of God in the universe he created. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1).

Just this morning, I was walking home from a prayer meeting at church. As I crossed the bridge over the interstate, I saw, to my left, on the horizon, that the sun was just rising. It was white with brightness. I could only let my eyes glance briefly to the side of the sun. The ball itself was too brilliant to allow a direct sight. Everything from horizon to horizon was luminous with its own color and shape in the crystal-clear air. It is wonderful how natural light—the brightest and most beautiful of all lights—can cheer the soul. But none of that beauty and none of this natural cheerfulness is the glory of God. It is “declaring the glory of God.” We are not pantheists. To see the glory of *God*, we must experience something supernatural. But it is there to see.

So there is a *divine* glory shining through the natural world—not just a natural glory. It's not just the glory of beautiful sunrises, and the stunning complexity of the human eye, and the solar system. It is something ineffable, but real and discernible. We are expected to see not just natural glory, but the glory *of God*.

The apostle Paul realizes that people do not see this divine glory by themselves. He explains why this is true and yet why none of us has an excuse for this spiritual blindness. It's because

what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the

creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. (Rom. 1:19–21)

This means that God has shown everyone the glory of his power and deity and generosity. If we do not see God’s glory, we are still responsible to see it, and to treasure it as supremely glorious, and to give God thanks. If we don’t, we are, Paul says, “without excuse.”

### **The Glory of God Authenticates Jesus**

There is another, similar argument for how people should have recognized the divinity of Jesus. How did Jesus expect his first followers to know that he was the divine Son of God? The answer is that his whole way of life, the kind of person he was, and the works that he did revealed a self-authenticating, divine glory. His closest disciple wrote, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and *we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

But many people did not see this glory. Judas certainly didn’t, in spite of three years of nearness. The Pharisees didn’t. Even his disciples were slow to see. To such people Jesus said, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me . . . ?” (John 14:9). He had shown them enough. They were responsible to see the glory—and to know that he was the divine Son of God. To be sure, Jesus was really human. He was natural, ordinary, finite, mortal. But he was also the virgin-born, supernatural Son of God (Luke 1:35). There was a glory shining through. Those who heard his teaching and saw his ministry were responsible to see it. This is how they were to know the truth.

### **The Glory of God Authenticates the Gospel**

Consider one more example of how glory authenticates truth. This one relates to the gospel itself—the heart of the good news about Jesus’s death and resurrection for sinners. How are people who hear the good news of the Christian gospel supposed to know that it’s from God? The apostle Paul answered: they can know that it’s from God because they see in it “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Or, putting it slightly differently, they can know

because they see in it “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

But many people hear the gospel and do not see divine glory. Why? It is not because the glory of God is unreal. It is not because the glory of God is not there in the gospel. It is because human beings, by nature, “are darkened in their understanding . . . due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). It is not owing mainly to ignorance, but to hardness. This hardness is a deep antipathy to the truth. They are “perishing, because *they refused to love the truth* and so be saved” (2 Thess. 2:10). Satan, the “god of this world,” exploits this hardness. Paul says he “has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). But the glory is really there in the gospel. To hear the gospel faithfully and fully presented is to be responsible to see divine glory.

### **The Glory of God Authenticates Scripture**

The point of *A Peculiar Glory* is that the glory of God authenticates Scripture in a way similar to these three examples. In and through the Scriptures we see the glory of God. What the apostles saw face-to-face in Jesus Christ they impart to us through the words of Scripture. “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). The glory that they saw in Christ, we can see through their words. The human words of Scripture are seen to be divine the way the human man Jesus was seen to be divine. Not all saw it. But the glory was there. And it is here, in the Scriptures.

### **All People Know God**

One more illustration might help clarify how this actually works in the human soul. How is the glory of God seen? To be sure, the natural eyes and ears and brains are part of the process. Without them we cannot even see or hear or construe the natural things that reveal God’s glory—creation, incarnation, gospel, Scripture. But this natural seeing is not decisive in seeing the glory of God. “Seeing they do not see,” Jesus said (Matt. 13:13). Something more than the use of the natural eyes and ears and brains must happen.

The way the apostle Paul puts it is that you must “have the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know” (Eph. 1:18). This too is strange—the heart has eyes! But perhaps not beyond comprehension. Most people are at home speaking of “the heart” as something more than the blood-pumping organ in our chest. Such language is not foreign to us. This “heart” is the real us. Intuitively we know that there is more to us than flesh and bones. We know we are not mere chemicals in a sack of skin. We would not talk the way we do about things like justice and love if we didn’t believe that.

Is it so strange, then, to add to this immaterial personhood the idea of immaterial eyes—“the eyes of the heart”? This inner person, who is the real us, sees and knows things that are not identical with what the eyes of the body can see. Pascal said, “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things.”<sup>2</sup> There is a spiritual seeing through and beyond natural seeing. There is a spiritual hearing through and beyond natural hearing. There is spiritual discerning through and beyond natural reasoning.

How may we conceive of what happens when the heart sees the glory of God? I found a clue in the way Paul speaks of our knowledge of the glory of God in nature. On the one hand, Paul says that we all “know God.” “Although *they knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Rom. 1:21). That is astonishing. Everyone knows God! But in other places, Paul emphatically says that by nature people do *not* know God. For example, “In the wisdom of God, *the world did not know God* through wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:21). The “Gentiles . . . do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:5). Formerly “*you did not know God*” (Gal. 4:8; see 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 John 4:8).

So, what does Paul mean in Romans 1:21 when he says that all human beings “know God”? To answer this, we might simply quote Romans 1:19–20, “What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” In other words, we might say that “knowing God” in Romans 1:21 simply means having the witness of creation available and clearly seeing it by the natural eye.

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2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées.*, no. 227, Kindle ed., loc. 1,531.

But is that all Paul means when he says, “They knew God”? I think there is more. In Romans 2:14–15, Paul says that people who have never heard of the law of God sometimes do what the law requires. Their consciences witness to God’s will. He puts it like this: “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.”

### **The Template of Divine Glory**

So here is my suggestion. “Knowing God” in Romans 1:21 includes this deeper heart experience of Romans 2:15. The analogy that I find helpful is to conceive of the innate knowledge of God and his will as a kind of template or mold in the human heart. This template is designed by God in every human heart with a shape, or a form, that corresponds to the glory of God. In other words, if the glory of God were seen with the eyes of the heart, it would fit the template so perfectly that we would know the glory is real. We would know we were made for this.

So when Paul says that all humans “know God,” or that all humans have the work of the law “written on their hearts,” he means that there is a glory-shaped template in every heart waiting to receive the glory of God. We all “know God” in the sense that we have this witness in our hearts that we were made for this glory. There is a latent expectancy and longing, and the shape of it is buried deep in our souls.

### **Hearts Packed Hard with Alien Loves**

The reason we do not see the glory of God is not that the template is faulty or that God’s glory is not shining. The reason is “hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). This hardness is a deep aversion to God, and a corresponding love for self-exaltation. Paul said that the mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). And Jesus said that “light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19). Our problem is not that we lack the light, but that we love the dark. This is the hardness of our hearts.

So, in my analogy of the template, this means that the hollowed-out shapes of the mold, which are perfectly shaped for the all-satisfying glory of God, are instead packed hard with the love of other things. So when the glory of God shines into the heart—from creation or incarnation or Jesus or the gospel—it finds no place. It is not felt or perceived as fitting. To the natural mind—the mind whose glory-shaped mold is

packed hard with idols—the glory of God is “foolishness” (1 Cor. 2:14 KJV). It doesn’t fit. As Jesus said to those whose hardness pushed them to the point of murder, “You seek to kill me because *my word finds no place in you*” (John 8:37). Of course, they could construe his words, and remember his words. But they could not see them as glorious or compellingly beautiful. They heard the words, but they did not love them. They loved the darkness that filled the temple that was designed for the brightness of the glory of God.

### The Supernatural Excavation of the Template

Perhaps you can see now why I said that the present book is about what it means to read the Bible supernaturally. If we are on the right track, the only hope for seeing the glory of God in Scripture is that God might cut away the diamond-hard, idolatrous substitutes for the glory of God that are packed into the template of our heart. The Bible speaks of this supernatural act in many ways. For example, it describes this supernatural in-breaking as a shining into our hearts of divine glory (2 Cor. 4:6), and as a granting of truth and repentance (2 Tim. 2:25), and as the giving of faith (Phil. 1:29), and as raising us from the dead (Eph. 2:5), and as new birth by the word (1 Pet. 1:23; James 1:18), and as the special revelation of the Father (Matt. 16:17) and the Son (Matt. 11:27), and as the enlightening of the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1:18), and as being given the secret of the kingdom of God (Luke 8:10).

When this miracle happens to us, the glory of God cuts and burns and melts and removes from the template the suicidal cement of alien loves and takes its rightful place. We were made for this. And the witness of this glory to the authenticity of the Scriptures is overwhelming. Where we saw only foolishness before, we now see the all-satisfying beauty of God. God has done this—supernaturally.

No one merely decides to experience the Christian Scriptures as the all-compelling, all-satisfying truth of one’s life. Seeing is a gift. And so the free embrace of God’s word is a gift. God’s Spirit opens the eyes of our heart, and what was once boring, or absurd, or foolish, or mythical, is now self-evidently real.

So my argument in *A Peculiar Glory* was that the glory of God, in and through the Scriptures, is a real, objective, self-authenticating reality. It is a solid foundation for a well-grounded faith in the truth of the

Bible. This faith is not a leap in the dark. It is not a guess, or a wager. If it were, our faith would be no honor to God. God is not honored if he is picked by the flip of a coin. A leap into the unknown is no tribute to one who has made himself unmistakably known by a peculiar glory.

### **It Is a Peculiar Glory**

Up to this point in my recap of *A Peculiar Glory*, I have not emphasized the word *peculiar*. What does that word imply? It implies that the way the Scripture reveals its complete truthfulness is by means of a *peculiar* glory. In other words, the power of Scripture to warrant well-grounded trust is not by *generic* glory. Not by mere dazzling. Not by simply bog-gling the mind with supernatural otherness. Rather, what we see as inescapably divine is a *peculiar* glory. And at the center of this peculiar glory is the utterly unique glory of Jesus Christ.

There is an essence, or a center, or a dominant peculiarity in the way God glorifies himself in Scripture. That dominant peculiarity is the revelation of God's majesty in meekness, his strength in suffering, and the wealth of his glory in the depth of his giving. This *peculiar* glory is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Along with countless manifestations in Scripture, this is the central brightness of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). This is what bursts upon the heart and mind of the person in whom God shines with the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

### **Encountering the Glory in Jesus**

This peculiar brightness shines through the whole Bible but finds its most beautiful radiance in the person and work of Jesus Christ. My guess is that the vast majority of people who come to believe in the divine inspiration and complete truthfulness of the Bible come to this conviction through an irresistible encounter with Jesus Christ. The peculiar glory that authenticates the Bible shines first and most clearly in Jesus.

How does that happen? Sometimes it is one particular word or deed of Jesus that penetrates the heart and begins to shatter the hardness that hinders the light of Christ's beauty. But sooner or later, it is the whole biblical portrait—climaxing in the crucifixion and resurrection—that conquers us and overcomes all resistance.

When the churches of Galatia were starting to drift away from the gospel of Jesus, Paul wrote to them and said, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (Gal. 3:1). This “portrayal” came with *words*, not pictures. But it was so real, and so vivid, that Paul said it was an appeal to their *eyes*—“before *your eyes* Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed.” They *saw* the peculiar glory of Christ in the preaching of the gospel.

Paul was so taken back by their apparent departure that he called it a kind of witchcraft. “Who has *bewitched* you?” They had been converted by seeing the peculiar glory of Jesus, most vividly in his crucifixion. His hope was that his letter would blow the demonic vapors away and restore the vivid sight of Christ’s glory. This is how most people come to a well-grounded faith in Christ and his word.

### **A Sketch of the Biblical Portrait of Jesus**

It may be that you do not have a clear sense of what I mean by the “whole biblical portrait” of Christ. Perhaps you do not resonate with the idea that your mind and heart can be brought to a well-grounded confidence in Christ through the peculiar glory of his biblical portrayal. If so, let me try to sketch a small version of that portrayal. The aim here is to illustrate the luminous constellation of Jesus’s words and deeds, in the hope that you will see how his divine glory shines through their cumulative, multifaceted uniqueness.

### **No One Loved God and Man More**

Jesus was a person of unwavering and incomparable love for God and man. He became angry when God was dishonored by irreligion (Mark 11:15–17), and when man was destroyed by religion (Mark 3:4–5). He taught us—and showed us how—to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry for righteousness, pure in heart, merciful, and peaceable (Matt. 5:3–9). He urged us to honor God from the heart (Matt. 15:8) and to put away all hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). And he practiced what he preached. He was meek and lowly in heart (Matt. 11:29). His life was summed up as “doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38).

He took time for little children and blessed them (Mark 10:13–16). He crossed social barriers to help women (John 4), foreigners (Mark

7:24–30), lepers (Luke 17:11–19), harlots (Luke 7:36–50), tax collectors (Matt. 9:9–13), and beggars (Mark 10:46–52). He washed his disciples’ feet, like a slave, and taught them to serve rather than be served (John 13:1–20).

Even when he was exhausted, his heart went out in compassion to the pressing crowds (Mark 6:31–34). Even when his own disciples were fickle and ready to deny him and forsake him, he wanted to be with them (Luke 22:15), and he prayed for them (Luke 22:32). He said his life was a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), and as he was being executed, he prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers (Luke 23:34).

### **No One Was More Truthful and Authentic**

Not only is Jesus portrayed as full of love for God and man; he is also presented as utterly truthful and authentic. He did not act on his own authority to gain worldly praise. He directed men to his Father in heaven. “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood” (John 7:18). He does not have the spirit of an egomaniac or a charlatan. He seems utterly at peace with himself and God. He is authentic.

This is evident in the way he saw through sham (Matt. 22:18). He was so pure, and so perceptive, that he could not be tripped up or cornered in debate (Matt. 22:15–22). He was amazingly unsentimental in his demands, even toward those for whom he had a special affection (Mark 10:21). He never softened the message of righteousness to increase his following or curry favor. Even his opponents were stunned by his indifference to human praise: “Teacher, we know that you are true, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men, but truly teach the way of God” (Mark 12:14 author’s translation). He never had to back down from a claim, and could be convicted of no wrong (John 8:46).

### **No One Spoke with Such Unassuming Authority**

But what made all this peculiarly amazing was the unobtrusive yet unmistakable *authority* that rang through all he did and said. The officers of the Pharisees speak for all of us when they say, “No one ever spoke like this man!” (John 7:46). There was something unquestionably

different about him. “He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:29). Yet he felt no need to flaunt it. It was natural to him.

His claims were not the open declaration of worldly power that the Jews expected from the Messiah. But they were unmistakable nonetheless. Though no one understood it at the time, there was no doubt that he had said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19; cf. Matt. 26:61). They thought it was an absurd claim that he would single-handedly rebuild an edifice that took forty-six years to build. But he was claiming, in his typically veiled way, that he would rise from the dead. And he would rise by his own power. “I will build it.”

In his last debate with the Pharisees, Jesus silenced them with this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They answered, “David’s son.” In response, Jesus quoted King David from Psalm 110:1, “The LORD said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” Then, with only slightly veiled authority, Jesus asked, “David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?” (Luke 20:44). In other words, for those who have eyes to see, the son of David—and *far more than the son*—is here.

That’s the way he put it more than once. “I tell you, *something greater* than the temple is here” (Matt. 12:6). “*Something greater* than Jonah is here. . . . *Something greater* than Solomon is here” (Matt. 12:41–42). This kind of veiled claim runs through all that Jesus said and did. For those who have eyes to see, and ears to hear, something unimaginably great—and glorious—is here.

### The Veil Is Lifted

Then there were words that were not at all veiled, and indeed were blasphemously self-exalting—unless they were true. He commanded evil spirits (Mark 1:27) and all the forces of nature (Mark 4:40), and they obeyed him. He issued forgiveness for sins (Mark 2:5), which only God can do (Mark 2:7). He summoned people to leave all and follow him in order to have eternal life (Mark 10:17–22; Luke 14:26–33). He said he would stand at the judgment day and declare who will enter heaven and who will not (Matt. 7:23). And he made the astonishing claim that “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men,

I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32–33). He said he was the final arbiter of the universe.

### **Love and Sacrifice to the Uttermost**

Then, with all this power—all this potential to make a life of exquisite pleasure and fame on earth—he sacrifices it all for the eternal happiness of sinners. He says uncompromisingly, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Over and over he told his disciples what was going to happen—it was the plan: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31).

In all of his self-giving, he was intentionally fulfilling Scripture. “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him” (Mark 14:21). So he not only submitted himself to death; he also entirely submitted himself to his Father in heaven (John 5:19)—and to God’s word in Scripture. He was not caught in a web of tragic circumstances. He was willingly laying down his life. “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:17–18).

The aim of his sacrifice, he said, was the forgiveness of sins. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). This was the greatest love that had ever been shown in all of history, because the greatest person made the greatest sacrifice for the greatest gift to the least deserving. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1).

### **Risen, Reigning, Coming**

When he rose from the dead on the third day, as he said he would (Luke 24:6–7), he appeared to his disciples for forty days, giving them many proofs that he was not a ghost but the very person—body and spirit—whom they had known for three years (Luke 24:39–42; Acts 1:3). He gave them a global command to make disciples from every nation (Matt. 28:19) and promised to send his Spirit and be with them to the end of the age (John 14:26; Matt. 28:20). He ascended into heaven where he reigns over the world (Rev. 17:14; 1 Pet. 3:22) at the right hand of God the Father (Matt. 22:44; 26:64). And he promised he

would come again to the earth in power and great glory (Matt. 16:27; 24:30) and bring all his people into everlasting joy (Matt. 25:21).

This is one sketch of the biblical portrait of Jesus. My argument in *A Peculiar Glory* is that the peculiar glory of God in Scripture comes to its clearest expression in this Jesus. His glory shines through the biblical account of his life and work. This glory is a real, objective, self-authenticating reality. It is a solid foundation for a well-grounded faith in the truth of the Bible.

### Answering the Charge of Circularity

Someone may raise the objection that I am arguing in a circle. They may say that I am assuming the reliability of the biblical portrait of Jesus (by citing all these texts), even as I argue for it. There are two kinds of answer to this objection. One is the scholarly answer that says, no, even if you assume the most critical stance toward the New Testament records, there is no Gospel writer, and (to use the language of critical scholars) no layer of the tradition, where this kind of portrait is not present. This is the Jesus we know from history. There is no comfortable, natural Jesus that fits into preconceptions. There is no reconstruction of another Jesus more historically reliable than this one.<sup>3</sup>

The other answer to the objection of circularity is that the portrait of Jesus in the New Testament is self-authenticating. Most people have no access to the scholarly historical arguments for the reliability of the Gospels. My argument is that this need not be a hindrance to well-grounded faith. The reality of Jesus himself, as the New Testament portrays him, carries in it sufficient marks of authenticity that we can have full confidence that this portrait is true. I am calling the self-authenticating beauty, which shines through the New Testament portrait of Jesus, the peculiar glory of God.

### Well-Grounded Faith for Nonhistorians

In fact, one of the key impulses behind the argument of *A Peculiar Glory* is the concern that there must be a way for the simplest person to have well-grounded confidence that the gospel is true. For example, what about a preliterate tribesman in the mountains of Papua New Guinea

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3. I have argued for this more fully in John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 29–39.

who has just heard the gospel story unfolded for the first time by a missionary? Or what about a child who is nine or ten years old and has heard the gospel from his parents for years? These people have no access to historical arguments about the authenticity of the New Testament documents. Can they come to a well-grounded confidence (not a leap in the dark) that the gospel is true and that the Scriptures are reliable?

Jonathan Edwards shared this concern more than 250 years ago. He had taken a position as missionary to the Native Americans of New England. He knew that if they were to have a well-grounded confidence in the truth of the gospel, it would not be by scholarly, historical reasoning. My approach to this problem builds on Edwards's answer. He said, "The gospel of the blessed God does not go abroad a-begging for its evidence, so much as some think: it has its highest and most proper evidence in itself. . . . The mind ascends to the truth of the gospel but by one step, and that is its divine glory."<sup>4</sup> Extending that argument to all of Scripture—that is what I tried to explain and defend in *A Peculiar Glory*.

### The Scope of the Whole Is to Give Glory to God

Another way to put it is to say that *A Peculiar Glory* was an extended investigation and explanation of the words of the Westminster Larger Catechism. Question 4 reads, "How doth it appear that the Scriptures are of the Word of God?" Answer: "The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Word of God, by . . . *the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God.*" In other words, the whole Bible, properly understood, has this divine purpose to communicate and display the glory of God. This pervasive aim of the Scriptures is carried through in such a way that God himself stands forth unmistakably as the unerring author guiding the human authors of the Bible.

### The Bible, God's Book

Therefore, my conclusion (with about three hundred pages of argumentation and explanation) is that "the Bible, consisting of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, is the infallible Word of God, verbally inspired by God, and without error in the original manuscripts."<sup>5</sup> This

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4. Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 2., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 299, 307.

5. Paragraph 1.1 of the *Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Affirmation of Faith*.

also implies that the Scriptures are the supreme and final authority in testing all claims about what is true and right and beautiful. It implies, in matters not explicitly addressed by the Bible, that what is true and right and beautiful is to be assessed by criteria consistent with the teachings of Scripture. All of this implies that the Bible has final authority over every area of our lives, and that we should, therefore, try to bring all our thinking and feeling and acting into line with what the Bible teaches.

I do not write those words lightly. They make a staggering claim. Breathtaking. If they are not true, they are outrageous. The Bible is not the private charter of a faith community among other faith communities. It is a total claim on the whole world. God, the creator, owner, and governor of the world, has spoken. His words are valid and binding on all people everywhere. That is what it means to be God.

To our astonishment, God's way of speaking with infallible authority in the twenty-first century is through *a book!* One book. Not many. Not this one! But the Bible. That is the breathtaking declaration of the Christian Scriptures. The implications of this are huge—including implications about how to read the Bible.

### **Two Facts Full of Implications**

But now we've seen that there is another spectacular fact that is full of implications about how we should read the Bible. First, there was the fact that the Creator of the universe has spoken through *a book*. And, second, there is the fact that he has shown this book to be completely true by the divine glory revealed through it. Both of these facts are laden with implications for how to read the book. On the one hand, it is a book composed with ordinary human language that needs to be understood—it is, after all, a real human book. And on the other hand, it is luminous with the supernatural light of divine glory. Which means, as we said at the beginning, the Bible calls for more than your natural kind of reading. Not less. But more. Natural *and* supernatural. If either is missing, we will misread God's word.

### **The Structure of the Book**

This book has three parts. Part 1 poses the all-important question, *What does the Bible tell us is the ultimate goal of reading the Bible?* I propose an answer with six implications and then devote ten chapters

to unfolding and testing those implications. Part 2 works out the inference from part 1 that reading the Bible really must be a supernatural act, if God's goals for our reading the Bible are to be reached. Finally, part 3 treats the practical outworking of such a claim in the seemingly ordinary human act of reading—the natural act of reading the Bible supernaturally.

PART 1

**The Ultimate Goal of  
Reading the Bible**

*. . . that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation.*



# Introduction to Part 1

## The Proposal

Some authors leave marks of their authorship that have nothing to do with the point of their book. That seems to be the case, for example, with the letters of the apostle Paul. He wrote, “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write” (2 Thess. 3:17). Again in Galatians 6:11, he wrote, “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.” In other words, these marks of his authorship are not the great burden of his letters. They are not the vision of God and Christ and the Christian life that moved him to write in the first place. These are signatures. And even though signatures are important for authentication, they are not essential to the message.

Other authors develop a style of writing that is so unique that it functions as a mark of their own authorship. One thinks of G. K. Chesterton’s use of paradox, or Ernest Hemingway’s staccato sentences. Or Charles Dickens’s florid descriptions. Or Emily Dickinson’s deceptively simple brevity of verse. Of course, these styles are not artificially disconnected from the message or the purpose of the writings. But neither are they the main point. Probably each author would say they are essential to what they are trying to do overall. But I doubt that any of them would say, “The main thing I want people to take away from my work is my style.”

### **The Meaning of Glory Is the Marker of Divinity**

But things are different when we think of God’s relationship to the Bible. He did not sign it with a distinctive signature. And when he inspired it (2 Tim. 3:16), he did not overrule the individual styles of the human

authors so as to create a style of his own—such as a divine diction, or heavenly vocabulary, or Godlike cadence. When the officers of the Pharisees said of Jesus, “No one ever spoke like this man!” they were not referring to his accent or his vocabulary or his oratorical skill. They were referring to the overall nature and impact of the man as he spoke. The Pharisees saw where this was going and said, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him?” (John 7:47–48). In other words, they saw that the officers were starting to see something that awakens faith. But it was not a signature or a style.

What is different about the way God authenticates the Bible is that the ground he gives for the Bible’s truth is the same as the center and aim of the Bible’s message. The peculiar glory of God is both the substance and the seal of the story that the Bible tells. It is not as though God speaks in his word, revealing his nature and his purposes, and then must add a separate marker for his divinity—like a signature or a style. His glory, through his word, is the message *and* his marker.

To be sure, God often “bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3). But the signs and wonders were not decisive. They could be denied, distorted, and rejected as completely as his word was—which we know from the life of Judas, and from certain people who saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead and then helped his murderers (John 11:45–53). Rather, those miracles were woven together with God’s word into a tapestry of the revelation of the peculiar glory of God. That glory is the ultimate meaning of the tapestry and the decisive mark of its divine reality.

### **Implications for the Big Picture**

If that is true, then we would not be surprised that the Bible calls for a supernatural reading, since seeing divine glory in human words is not your ordinary way of reading a book. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Is it, in fact, true that the peculiar glory of God is the ultimate meaning of the tapestry of Scripture? Is this what we should aim to see when we read the Bible? That is our first key question in this book. That is what part 1 is about.

The way I would like to put the question is this: What does the Bible itself say is the ultimate goal of reading the Bible? If the Bible makes clear that the goal of reading the Bible is to see what can only be supernaturally seen, then the implications for how we read the Bible will be pro-

found. So we ask in part 1 what the Bible tells us is the ultimate goal of reading the Bible. Then, in part 2, we examine the implication that this calls for a supernatural reading of the Bible. And finally, in part 3, we present the implications of this for the ordinary human act of reading.

### The Proposal

So, first, what does the Bible tell us is the ultimate goal of reading the Bible? What follows is my proposed answer to this question, with six implications. The aim of part 1 of this book is to see whether this proposal and its implications are true.

The Bible itself shows that our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation. In other words, each time we pick up the Bible to read, we should intend that reading would lead to this end. The way that we as individuals are caught up into this ultimate aim as we read the Bible becomes clear as we spell out six implications that flow from this proposed answer to our question. When we say that the ultimate goal of reading the Bible is that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation, we imply that:

1. the infinite worth and beauty of God are *the ultimate value and excellence* of the universe;
2. that the supremely *authentic and intense worship* of God's worth and beauty is the ultimate aim of all his work and word;
3. that we should always read his word in order to *see* this supreme worth and beauty;
4. that we should aim in all our seeing to *savor* his excellence above all things;
5. that we should aim to be *transformed* by this seeing and savoring into the likeness of his beauty,
6. so that more and more people would be drawn into the worshiping family of God until the bride of Christ—across all centuries and cultures—is complete in number and beauty.

The following chapters in part 1 focus on the parts of this proposal and put them all to the test: What does the Bible itself say about this proposed goal of reading and its implications?

The great end of God's works, *which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed but one; and this one end is most properly and comprehensively called the glory of God.*

JONATHAN EDWARDS

[He] works all things according to the counsel of his will . . . to the praise of his glory.

EPHESIANS 1:11–12

## Reading the Bible toward God's Ultimate Goal

*“Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”*

### *The Proposal*

Our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation. This implies:

1. that the infinite worth and beauty of God are *the ultimate value and excellence* of the universe;
2. that the supremely *authentic and intense worship* of God's worth and beauty is the ultimate aim of all his work and word;
3. that we should always read his word in order to *see* this supreme worth and beauty;
4. that we should aim in all our seeing to *savor* his excellence above all things;
5. that we should aim to be *transformed* by this seeing and savoring into the likeness of his beauty,
6. so that more and more people would be drawn into the worshipping family of God until the bride of Christ—across all centuries and cultures—is complete in number and beauty.

Our proposal elevates the worth and beauty of God to the highest place possible. The ultimate aim of all Bible reading, I argue, is that *God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in everlasting, white-hot worship*. There is nothing higher than the worth and beauty of God. That is what the first implication expresses: *the infinite worth and beauty of God are the ultimate value and excellence of the universe*.

So the first thing we need to do is clarify from Scripture the meaning and then the supremacy of the *glory* of God. That may seem strange since I didn't even use the word *glory* in my proposal or its implications. Nevertheless, the reality is there, and it is the most important one. I used other words for it, namely, the pairs "worth and beauty" and "value and excellence."

### Finding Words for the Glory of God

I recall one day when I was in college, Clyde Kilby, my favorite English teacher, said something to this effect: "One of the greatest tragedies of the fall is that we get tired of familiar glories." That simple statement sank deep into my consciousness. It made me very sad, because I saw how superficial and unresponsive I was to so many wonders around me. It filled me with a longing not to be like that. I did not want to arrive in the Alps, be filled with wonder for a couple days, but by the end of the week be watching television in the chalet. I lamented my ability to actually yawn during Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."

Which means I loathe the thought of speaking of the glory of God in a way that is so familiar or stale or clichéd that it wakens no sense of wonder. Of course, I realize that only God can waken true wonder at the glory of God. Kilby was right. The fall has left us deeply dysfunctional emotionally. We are excited by trivia and bored by grandeur. We strain out a gnat to admire and swallow a camel of glory unnoticed. Nevertheless, I want to try to use language that helps us see what the glory of God is, if I can. Hence the effort to find other words besides *glory*—like *worth* and *beauty* and *value* and *excellence*.

### What Is the Glory of God?

My understanding of the glory of God has been deeply shaped by its relationship to the holiness of God. I have in mind the way this relationship comes to expression in Isaiah 6:1–3:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Why did the prophet not say, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his *holiness!*"? My suggestion is that the glory of God is the holiness of God put on display. When God's holiness shines into creation, it is called "God's glory."

### The Holiness of God

This pushes the question about the meaning of *glory* back into the holiness of God. What is that?<sup>1</sup> The root meaning of the Old Testament word for *holy* (Hebrew *chadōsh*) is the idea of being separate—different from and separated from something. When applied to God, that means God's holiness is his separateness from all that is not God. This, then, means he is in a class by himself. And like all good things that are rare, the more rare it is, the more valuable it is. Therefore, God is supremely valuable.

We can see this meaning of God's holiness in the following two illustrations. First, when Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it the way God had instructed him, God said, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as *holy* in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them" (Num. 20:12; see 27:14). In other words, when Moses distrusted God, he did not treat him as being in a magnificent class of power and trustworthiness by himself. He treated him as just another common person to be distrusted as unwilling or unable to do what he said. But God is not common. He is not like others. He is holy.

Second, in Isaiah 8:12–13, God says to Isaiah, "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall honor as *holy*. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." In other words,

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1. In what follows I am adapting some things I wrote about holiness in *Acting the Miracle: God's Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 29–41, 127–38.

don't lump God into the same group as all your other fears and dreads. Treat him as an utterly unique fear and dread. Set him apart from all the ordinary fears and dreads.

So here is how I conceive of the holiness of God. God is so separate, so above, so distinct from all else—all that is not God—that he is self-existent and self-sustaining and self-sufficient. Thus he is infinitely complete and full and perfect in himself. He is separate from, and transcendent above, all that is not God. So he was not brought into existence by anything outside himself. He is, therefore, self-existent. He depends on nothing for his ongoing existence and so is self-sustaining. And, therefore, he is utterly self-sufficient. Complete, full, perfect.

The Bible makes plain that this self-existing, self-sustaining, self-sufficient God exists as three divine persons in one divine essence. Thus the Father knows and loves the Son perfectly, completely, infinitely; and the Son knows and loves the Father perfectly, completely, infinitely. And the Holy Spirit is the perfect, complete, infinite expression of the Father's and the Son's love of each other. This perfect Trinitarian fellowship is essential to the fullness and perfection of God. There is no lack, no deficiency, no need—only perfect fullness and completeness and self-sufficiency.

### **The Moral Dimension of God's Holiness**

This is the holiness of God: his transcendent completeness and self-sufficiency. But there is a missing dimension in that description of holiness. This is the dimension I mentioned above that flows from his absolute rareness—being one of a kind in his perfection. This implies that he is of infinite value. One of the reasons it is crucial to focus on this aspect of God's holiness is that it helps us understand why the Bible treats God's holiness not just as transcendent *being*, but also as transcendent *purity or goodness*.

In other words, introducing God's infinite worth helps us conceive of God's holiness in moral categories. We take this so for granted that we don't ponder how this can be. How can God be thought of as infinitely good or right or pure, when there are no standards outside of God by which to measure him? Before creation, all there was was God. So, when there is only God, how do we define good? How can holiness mean more than transcendence? How can there be holiness with a *moral* dimension?

My answer is this: the moral dimension of God's holiness is that every affection, every thought, and every act of God is consistent with the infinite worth of his transcendent fullness. In other words, holiness is not only the infinite worth of God's transcendent fullness but also the harmony that exists between the worth of that transcendent fullness and all God's affections, thoughts, and acts. This harmony of God's acts with his infinite worth we may call "the beauty of God's holiness." Stephen Charnock (1628–1680) uses a quaint phrase to express what I am trying to say. God's holiness, he says, is that he "works with a becomingness to his own excellency."<sup>2</sup> The old word *becomingness* means "suitableness, agreeableness, fittingness, harmony." That's how an act of God is good or pure or perfect. It is agreeable to—perfectly expressive of, in harmony with—the worth of God.

### The Glory of God as the Beauty of God's Holiness

This brings us back to the relationship between God's holiness and his glory. We experience the beauty of God's holiness as the glory of God. As God's holiness becomes expressive—creating and penetrating the world—we call it the "glory of God."<sup>3</sup> His glory is the streaming out of his holiness for the world to see and admire. Gerhard Kittel's lengthy article on glory in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* concludes that God's glory "denotes divine and heavenly radiance . . . that which makes God impressive to man, the force of His self-manifestation."<sup>4</sup>

We must constantly remind ourselves that we are speaking of a glory that is ultimately beyond created comparison. "The glory of God" is the way you designate the infinite beauty and the infinite greatness of the person who was there before anything else was there. In other words, it is the worth and beauty and greatness that exists without origin, without comparison, without analogy, without being judged or assessed by any external criterion. It is the all-defining, absolute original of worth

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2. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 115.

3. I don't mean to imply an ironclad limitation of the word *glory* for the manifestation of the radiance of God's holiness *in the world*. For example, Jesus prays, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see *my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world*" (John 17:24). But, in general, it holds that the glory of God is the radiance of God—that which shines out from his essence.

4. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 237–38.

and greatness and beauty. All created worth and greatness and beauty come from it, and point to it, but do not comprehensively or adequately reproduce it.

“The glory of God” is a way of saying that there is objective, absolute reality to which all human admiration, wonder, awe, veneration, praise, honor, acclaim, and worship are pointing. We were made to find our deepest pleasure in admiring what is infinitely admirable, that is, the glory of God. The glory of God is not the psychological projection of human longing onto reality. On the contrary, inconsolable human longing is the evidence that we were made for God’s glory.

### **The Supreme Importance of God’s Glory**

So when the Bible puts the glory of God on display as the goal of all that God does, this is another way of saying that God’s infinite worth and beauty—or his ultimate value and excellence—is the supreme reality in the universe. And that is, in fact, what we find in the Bible. From beginning to end, God tells us and shows us that his ultimate goal in all he does is to communicate his glory for the world to see and for his people to admire and enjoy and praise.

We can show this by pointing to six stages of redemption, beginning in eternity past and moving through creation and history to eternity future. At each of these stages, God says explicitly that his purpose is that his glory be known and praised—that is, gladly admired, expressively enjoyed, heartily treasured.

### *Predestination*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of the glory of his grace*. (Eph. 1:3–6 author’s translation)

Redemption begins in eternity past in the heart of God. He predestines a people “for adoption . . . through Jesus Christ.” Paul tells us the deepest root and the highest goal of this predestination. He says it is rooted

in “the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:5). And he says its ultimate goal is “the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:6).

How quickly do we pass over that last statement! Whose purpose is being expressed in the words “he predestined us for adoption . . . to the praise of his glorious grace”? It is *God's* purpose. And what is that purpose? That we praise. That we praise what? His glory. The peculiar glory of his grace. So from all eternity, God's plan was to have a family adopted “through Jesus Christ” who would praise his glory to all eternity. There are few things more important to know than that. Few things will shape more of your life than that—if it penetrates to the center of your soul.

The plan from eternity past was praise for eternity future. The one who planned and the one to be praised are the same: God. And the focus of the praise is his own peculiar glory—which shines most brightly as the glory of grace in the person and work of Jesus.

### *Creation*

I will say to the north, Give up,  
and to the south, Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the end of the earth,  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created *for my glory*,  
whom I formed and made. (Isa. 43:6–7)

What does “for my glory” mean? It doesn't mean that the creation will bring God's glory into being. He has glory already. Creation is overflow. It means that creation will show, or display, or communicate God's glory. That is why Israel was created. And that is why all of us were created. This is the point of Genesis 1:27–28:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

If you are very great and you fill the earth with seven billion images of yourself, what is your aim? Your aim is to be known and admired for your greatness. But, of course, since sin entered the world, human beings prefer to live for their own glory, not God's. That is why God

planned a history of redemption—so that those who put their hope in Christ “might be to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:12). We were created for God’s glory in our first birth. And through Christ we are born again—made new as new creations—for his glory. *Human existence is for the glory of God.* That is why he created the world (Ps. 19:1) and the human race (Gen. 1:27–28), and the new race in Christ (Eph. 1:12).

### *Incarnation*

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and *we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father*, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The incarnation of the eternal Son of God—the Word who “was with God, and . . . was God” (John 1:1)—put God’s glory on display as never before. “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” This was why God sent him, and why he came.

Paul makes this point in Philippians 2:6–11. He describes the incarnation like this:

Though he was in the form of God . . . he was born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he . . . was obedient to the point of death. . . . Therefore God has highly exalted him . . . so that at the name of Jesus . . . every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father.* (author’s translation)

If you follow the line of thought carefully, what you see is that God exalted Christ because he took on human form and was obedient to death. He was an obedient human; therefore God exalted him. And the aim of that incarnation and consequent exaltation was *God’s glorification*. “Therefore God has highly exalted him . . . to *the glory of God the Father.*” Thus God’s aim in the incarnation of the Son was the display of the peculiar glory of the Father in the incarnation and work of Christ.

### *Propitiation*

“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. *Father, glorify your name.*” Then a voice came from heaven: “*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.*” (John 12:27–28)

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. (John 17:1)

The hour Jesus is speaking of is the hour of his death. He had come to die. “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15). And the reason that needs to be done is that all humans are under the wrath of God. There is no hope for any of us without a propitiation—that is, a sacrifice that removes the wrath of God. Jesus gives himself as that sacrifice. The result is that “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36). There are only two options. Believe and escape God's wrath. Or disobey the command to believe and remain under the wrath. Jesus said that he came to provide this escape for the glory of the Father. “For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, *glorify your name*” (John 12:27–28).

The apostle Paul explained more fully how this aspect of Christ's death actually works. He wrote in Romans 3:25–26:

God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. *This was to show God's righteousness*, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was *to show his righteousness* at the present time, so that he might be righteous and the one who declares the one righteous who has faith in Jesus. (author's translation)

Twice Paul says that God sent Christ as a propitiation “to *show* God's righteousness.” Also he says that the purpose is “that he might *be* righteous.” So three times Paul describes the death of Jesus as the vindication of the righteousness of God.

*Did Christ die for us or for God?* I once preached a sermon at the student gathering called Passion under the title “Did Christ Die for Us or for God?” This passage, Romans 3:25–26, was my text. The answer to the question was that *Christ died for God's glory* so that his death might count for our salvation. Why did Christ need to die to show that God is righteous? Indeed, why did he need to die so that God, in declaring sinners righteous, might himself *be* righteous? The answer is given plainly: “because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” God had not punished the sins of the Old Testament saints. He had passed over them. Just like he is still passing over the sins of all who trust Jesus.

But he had just said in Romans 3:23 that these sins belittle the glory of God. “All have sinned and *fall short of the glory of God.*” When a person sins, he is expressing a preference for something other than God. He is saying that God and his way are less satisfying than the way of sin. This is an outrageous insult to God. We are exchanging the glory of God for another glory (Rom. 1:23).

Therefore *sinning is a discounting of the value of the glory of God.* If God passes over this attitude and this behavior, as though his glory were not of infinite value, he is acting unrighteously. He is agreeing that other things are more to be desired than he is. That is unrighteous. It is a lie.

Nevertheless, that is what God has done. He has passed over former sins. He looks unrighteous. And this, Paul says, is why God put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood. In Christ’s death for the glory of God (John 12:27), Jesus showed the world that God does not ignore the belittling of his glory. He does not sweep God-demeaning sins under the rug of the universe. He shows, in the death of Christ, that his glory is of infinite value. He is not unrighteous; he did not treat his glory as worthless. When he passes over sin for Christ’s sake, all creation can see that this is not because the glory of God is negligible, but because in Christ there has been an infinite display of the worth of the glory of God. “For this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, *glorify your name*” (John 12:27–28).

Therefore, we know that *Christ died for the glory of God.* Christ gave himself as a propitiation of the wrath of God to vindicate the righteousness of God in passing over God-belittling sins. And in doing this, Christ himself, in his death and resurrection, became part of the magnificent divine display of the peculiar glory of God.

### *Sanctification*

It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, *to the glory and praise of God.* (Phil. 1:9–11)

We always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, *so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.* (2 Thess. 1:11–12)

God makes his people holy—sanctifies them—in order to put his own glory on display. He works in us to “fill us with the fruit of righteousness.” Why? “To the glory and praise of God.” We can easily overlook in Philippians 1:9–11 that Paul is praying *to God*. That is, he is asking *God* to glorify God in the righteousness of his people. This is God's purpose and God's doing, not just Paul's.

Similarly, in 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12, Paul prays that the believers be able to carry through every good work “so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.” *Good deeds are for the glory of Christ*. And through him for the glory of God. This is what we should expect if God *predestined* us for his glory, and *created* us for his glory, and *died to save* us for his glory. Step by step in the history of redemption, God is working all things for the communication of his glory for the enjoyment of his people.

### *Consummation*

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day *to be glorified* in his saints, and *to be marveled at* among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thess. 1:9–10)

At the last day—the end of history as we know it—Jesus is coming back to this earth. Why? The reason given here is so that he might “be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” The word *glorify* does not mean “make glorious.” It means to *show* as glorious—or to acclaim or praise or exalt or magnify as glorious.

*Magnify*. Yes, that is a good word for *glorify*. But it is ambiguous. We do not magnify him the way a microscope magnifies. We magnify him the way a telescope magnifies. A microscope makes tiny things look bigger than they are. Telescopes make huge things, which already look tiny, appear more like what they really are. That is why he is coming back: finally to be shown and seen and enjoyed for who he really is.

### **For Our White-Hot Worship**

So from eternity to eternity—in predestination, creation, incarnation, propitiation, sanctification, and consummation—the Bible makes explicit that God's ultimate aim in all things is the revelation and exal-

tation of his glory. It is evident from this that the glory of God is the supreme treasure over all else that exists. That is (as the first implication of the proposal states) *the infinite worth and beauty of God are the ultimate value and excellence of the universe.*

The proposal I am making about the ultimate goal of reading the Bible, however, is not only that the glory of God—the worth and beauty of God—be revealed and shown to be an exalted glory. The proposal is *that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in everlasting, white-hot worship.* And this implies that the ultimate aim of all God's work and word is the supremely authentic and intense worship of his worth and beauty. In other words, as I will try to show in the next chapter, the ultimate goal of reading the Bible is not only the worldwide exaltation of God's worth, but also the white-hot exultation of his people in worship. That joyful exultation in worship is the way God planned the highest exaltation of his glory.



Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.

1 PETER 1:8

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

PSALM 63:1

## Reading the Bible toward White-Hot Worship

*“Because you are lukewarm,  
. . . I will spit you out of my mouth.”*

### *The Proposal*

Our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is that God’s infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation. This implies:

1. that the infinite worth and beauty of God are *the ultimate value and excellence* of the universe;
2. **that the supremely *authentic and intense worship* of God’s worth and beauty is the ultimate aim of all his work and word;**
3. that we should always read his word in order to *see* this supreme worth and beauty;
4. that we should aim in all our seeing to *savor* his excellence above all things;
5. that we should aim to be *transformed* by this seeing and savoring into the likeness of his beauty,
6. so that more and more people would be drawn into the worshipping family of God until the bride of Christ—across all centuries and cultures—is complete in number and beauty.

We are asking in part 1, “What is our ultimate goal in reading the Bible?” Our proposed answer is *that God’s infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in the everlasting, white-hot worship of the blood-bought bride of Christ from every people, language, tribe, and nation.*

Our first step in establishing this was to show from Scripture, in the previous chapter, that *the infinite worth and beauty of God are the ultimate value and excellence of the universe.* What we saw was that from beginning to end, God lifts up his glory as the supreme aim of all things. If there is something of greater value or excellence, then God would seem to be an idolater. He would be leading us to glorify most what is not most glorious. But he is not an idolater. He is righteous. Therefore (affirming our first implication), the worth and beauty of God are indeed the ultimate value and excellence in the universe. Nothing is more valuable or beautiful.

### **The Worship of God Is the Aim of Exalting His Worth**

The second implication of our proposal follows from the first one. *The supremely authentic and intense worship of God’s worth and beauty is the ultimate aim of all his work and word.* This is implicit in the first implication. It is also explicit in the Bible. If God reveals himself to be the supreme value and excellence in the universe, then it follows that we should worship him for his supreme worth and beauty—and not just in a casual way but with white-hot devotion. Our worship follows our values. For that is what worship is. It is the experience of valuing, and cherishing, and treasuring what we perceive to be our greatest treasure.

This second implication is also explicit in the Bible. Jesus says plainly that God is seeking *worshippers*. “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for *the Father is seeking such people to worship him*” (John 4:23). Not surprisingly, then, the Bible commands us to worship him in accord with his supreme worth.

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness. (Ps. 29:1–2)

There is a glory that belongs to his name. It is “due his name.” This is what we have seen in God’s zeal to exalt his glory as the goal of all things. Now

here it is made explicit that there is a *response* from us—worship—that accords with this glory. This is why God was exalting his glory—that we might worship. God’s exaltation of God aims at our exultation *in* God.

### **Worship Is the Aim of Every Stage of Redemption**

The Bible makes this explicit in relation to all six of the stages of redemptive history that we saw in the previous chapter. The goal is worship.

- In regard to *predestination*, “he predestined us . . . to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:5, 14). Not just to know it but to praise it. The aim is worship.
- In regard to *creation*, the heavenly beings cry out, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things” (Rev. 4:11). Everlasting worship in heaven happens precisely in response to God’s creating all things.
- In regard to Christ’s *incarnation* and saving death, the angels of heaven cry, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12). The glory of Christ’s saving work will be worshiped forever.
- In regard to propitiation, and the great work of Christ’s decisive wrath-removing ransom, heaven worships with a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).
- In regard to the *sanctification* of God’s people, Paul tells us that the ultimate aim of being “filled with the fruit of righteousness” is that this transformation might be “to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11). Not just glory but also *praise*. Which makes explicit that the aim of holiness in the Christian life is that God be worshiped.
- And in regard to the *consummation* of all things at the second coming of Christ, the aim is not just that his glory might be seen, but that it might “be *marveled* at among all who have believed” (2 Thess. 1:10).

So the Bible is explicit in affirming that the aim of all God’s acts is that we might praise and worship him for his supreme worth and beauty.

## Two Pressing Questions

Two questions are pressing on us for answers at this point.

First, what is the worship that the Bible says is the ultimate aim of all God's work and word?

Second, why is God not a megalomaniac in demanding this kind of worship for himself?

I pose these two questions together because the answer to the first is key in answering the second.

### C. S. Lewis on the Consummation of Praise

I first saw the relationship between these two questions with the help of C. S. Lewis. Before he was a Christian, God's demand for worship was a great obstacle to Lewis's faith. He said it seemed to him like "a vain woman who wants compliments." But then as he discovered the nature of worship, the question about God's seeming vanity (or megalomania) was also answered. He wrote:

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. . . . The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians and scholars.

My whole, more general difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of complement that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are, the delight is incomplete till it is expressed.<sup>1</sup>

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1. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 93–95.

In other words, genuine, heartfelt praise is not artificially added to joy. It is the consummation of joy itself. The joy we have in something beautiful or precious is not complete until it is expressed in some kind of praise.

### **The Answer to God's Seeming Megalomania**

Lewis saw the implication of this for God's seemingly vain command that we worship him. Now he saw that this was not vanity or megalomania. This was love. This was God seeking the consummation of our joy in what is supremely enjoyable—himself.

If God demeaned his supreme worth in the name of humility, *we* would be the losers, not God. God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the highest virtue. For there is only one supremely beautiful being in the universe. There is only one all-satisfying person in the universe. And because of his supreme beauty and greatness, what the psalmist says in Psalm 16:11 is true: “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” If God hides that, or denies that, he might seem humble, but he would be hiding from us the very thing that would make us completely happy forever.

But if God loves us the way the Bible says he does, then he will give us what is best for us. And what is best for us is himself. So if God loves us fully, God will give us God, for our enjoyment and nothing less. But if our enjoyment is not complete until it comes to completion in praise, then God would not be loving if he was indifferent to our praise. If he didn't pursue our praise in all that he does (as we have seen!), he would not be pursuing the fullness of our satisfaction. He would not be loving.

So what emerges is that God's pervasive self-exaltation in the Bible—his doing everything to display his glory and to win our worship—is not unloving; it is the way an infinitely all-glorious God loves. His greatest gift of love is to give us a share in the very satisfaction that he has in his own excellence, and then to call that satisfaction to its fullest consummation in praise. This is why I maintain that the supremely authentic and intense worship of God's worth and beauty is the ultimate aim of all his work and word.

### **Supremely Authentic and Intense**

But what about those words “supremely authentic and intense”? And what about that phrase “white-hot worship”? Our ultimate aim in

reading the Bible, I am arguing, is that God's infinite worth and beauty would be exalted in everlasting, *white-hot* worship. When I use the phrase "white-hot worship," I am calling out the visceral implications of the words "supremely authentic and intense." The reason words like these are important is that there is a correlation between the measure of our intensity in worship and the degree to which we exhibit the value of the glory of God. Lukewarm affection for God gives the impression that he is moderately pleasing. He is not moderately pleasing. He is infinitely pleasing. If we are not intensely pleased, we need forgiveness and healing. Which, of course, we do.

We know this because Jesus said to the church at Laodicea, "Because you are lukewarm . . . I will spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16). The opposite of being lukewarm in our affections for Jesus is what Paul commands in Romans 12:11, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be *fervent in spirit* . . ." The word *fervent* in the original (Greek ζέοντες, *zeontes*), means "boiling." The intensity of our worship matters. Jesus indicted the hypocrites of his day by saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Matt. 15:8). Authentic worship comes from the heart, not just the lips.

### **Undivided and Fervent**

A key measure of a heart's worship is whether it is authentic and intense or divided and tepid. Authentic means undivided, genuine, real, sincere, unaffected. Intensity implies energy, vigor, ardor, fervor, passion, zeal.

The Bible does not leave us wondering what kind of worship God is aiming at in all his work and word. Over and over God calls for our hearts to be authentic and undivided in our worship. "You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your strength and with *all* your mind" (Luke 10:27). You shall "search after him with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul" (Deut. 4:29); and "serve the LORD your God with *all* your heart" (Deut. 10:12); and turn to him with *all* your heart (1 Sam. 7:3); and "trust in the LORD with *all* your heart" (Prov. 3:5); and "rejoice and exult with *all* your heart" (Zeph. 3:14); and give thanks to the Lord with your *whole* heart (Ps. 9:1). No competitors. No halfhearted affections.

And the Bible makes clear what level of worship intensity God is

pursuing. When Peter wrote to the churches of Asia Minor, he did not consider *inexpressible* joy to be exceptional, but typical: “Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is *inexpressible* and filled with glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). The psalmist had tasted this kind of joy and made it his lifelong quest. “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1–2). “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1).

Similarly, the early Christians had tasted the joy set before them, and when they were called on to suffer with their imprisoned friends, they showed how intensely they cherished their heavenly treasure by the way they responded to losing their earthly one: “You had compassion on those in prison, and you *joyfully* accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb. 10:34; cf. 11:24–26; 12:2).

God is not pursuing lukewarm worship, but worship that is supremely authentic and intense—*everlasting, white-hot worship*. It will never end. “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev. 5:13). White-hot and without end. That’s the goal of creation and redemption.

### **The Sorrow of Our Shortfall**

Of course, one of the great sorrows of this fallen age is that we fall short of that measure of authenticity and intensity every day. God knows our frame, that we are dust (Ps. 103:14). He knows his own children. He can discern worship that is true, even if flawed. And he will not leave us in this frustrated brokenness forever. When Jesus prayed that we would see his glory beyond the dimness and dysfunction of this world (John 17:24), he also prayed that our love for him would be purified and made unimaginably intense. “[Father, I pray] that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26).

Someday we will love Jesus with the very love that God the Father has for God the Son. This is literally unimaginable. For the Father loves the Son with infinite love—a love whose authenticity and intensity cannot be measured. So don’t lose heart in all your struggles to love him as you ought. The day is coming when we will see him as he is. We will be

changed. We will love him with a love beyond imagination. It will be supremely authentic and supremely intense.

### **Worship in Spirit and Truth**

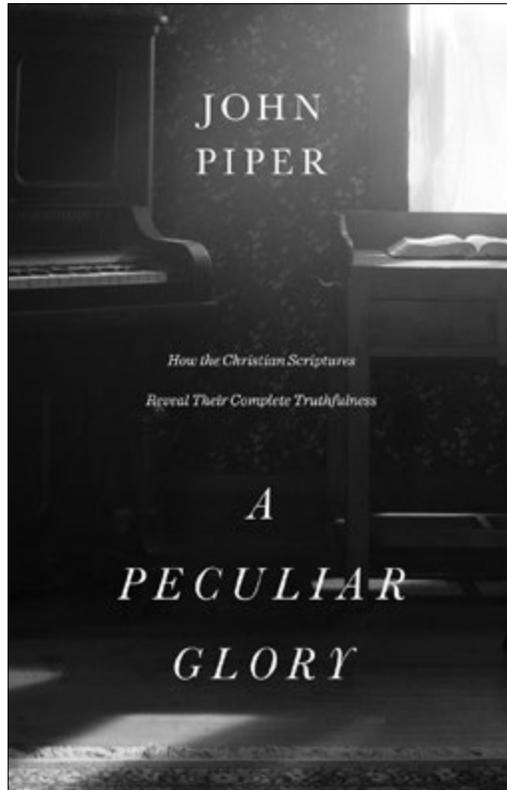
God created and governs the world in order to put his all-satisfying glory on display for the enjoyment of his creatures. And the aim of that display is the white-hot worship of his people. I have stressed the authenticity and intensity of worship. But, of course, truth and feeling are both essential. Doctrine and delight are indispensable. “True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit *and* truth” (John 4:23). Truth matters. There is no real worship without it. Intense affections for God, when we do not know God, are not truly affection for God. They are affections for a distortion of God in our imagination.

According to Paul, this could not be more serious. He said it is possible to have zeal (intensity!) for God and not be saved: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have *a zeal for God*, but *not according to knowledge*” (Rom. 10:1–2). Passion for God that is not based on a true vision of God is not a saving passion. So we are playing with fire either way: tepid affections and false doctrine are both deadly. God does not want us to die. Therefore, he exalts his glory for our all-satisfying enjoyment in everything he does.

### **No Song without Sight**

That is the point of this chapter: *the supremely authentic and intense worship of God’s worth and beauty is the ultimate aim of all his work and word*. And if it is the ultimate aim of all his work and word, then it is the ultimate aim of the Bible—and of reading the Bible. In all our reading, we are aiming and hoping and praying that God would use his word to make us a vital part of the everlasting, white-hot worship of his infinite worth and beauty. How does that happen in reading the Bible? That is where we turn next. It happens by *seeing* in Scripture God’s supreme worth and beauty. There is no song in worship without a *sight* of God’s wonders.

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