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Chapter 1



THE ULTIMATE PRIORITY

A principle of Bible interpretation called the Law of First Mention simply means that clues to understanding a biblical subject are often found in the first time it is mentioned in Scripture. The introductory reference to a subject can teach us a lot about how Scripture views it.

This principle is one reason that the book of Genesis is so vital to biblical theology and Christian doctrine. It is the book of beginnings that addresses matters of origin. Genesis 1–2 records the story of creation. Genesis 3 tells the story of the fall of humanity into sin. As you read into chapter 4, Genesis continues to introduce important firsts in human history: the first sex act, the first pregnancy, the first birth, the first siblings, the first shepherd, the first murder, and the first lie.

In this chapter, I want us to consider another first recorded in Genesis 4: the first offering of worship, which Cain and Abel offered to the Lord. Theirs was probably not the first ever offering of worship in history. Most likely, Adam and Eve offered worship to the Lord and taught their

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children to do so. But it is the first recorded one. As such, it sets a precedent. This first act of worship teaches the ultimate priority of worship: make sure the Lord is pleased.

The Bible says Adam knew Eve his wife (Gen. 4:1). Eve conceived and gave birth to a son, whom they named Cain. Cain followed in his father's footsteps and worked the ground as a farmer. Eve conceived again and gave birth to Abel, the first of a long line of godly shepherds. After introducing us to Cain and Abel and their respective vocations, Scripture abruptly shifts to the offering of worship they presented to God: "In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions" (Gen. 4:3–4a).

The report of Cain and Abel's offerings has no obvious agenda. Moses simply reports that both men brought an offering in keeping with their respective vocations. Cain, the farmer, presented an offering from the fruit of the ground. Abel, the shepherd, presented an offering from his flock of sheep. The focus is not on the men or their offerings. The stress is placed on the Lord's response to the two men's offerings: "And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (Gen. 4:4b–5a).

ACCEPTABLE WORSHIP

This first recorded act of worship was definitely not about what Cain and Abel got out of it. Their vocations, resources, or preferences were not considered. It was about whether God was pleased with their offerings. The text is clear that God accepted one offering and not the other. Interestingly, the text ties these brothers to their offerings. The Lord had regard for Abel *and* his offering. But the Lord had no regard for Cain *and* his offering. This is how

worship works. You cannot separate how God views you from how God views your worship. “For the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7b).

Why did God regard Abel and his offering and disregard Cain and his offering? The text does not specify, yet it is the subject of much debate. The most logical reason given is because Cain’s offering was not a blood offering. A blood offering would later be legislated by Moses for the atonement of sin. Moreover, blood sacrifices pointed forward to the substitutionary death of Christ. Hebrews 12:24 says we have come to “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” In the Old Testament, however, God accepted both blood and grain offerings.

Others contend that the problem was the quality of Cain’s offering. They claim Cain gave less than his best, while Abel gave from the finest of his flock of sheep. But the text does not suggest that Cain gave the Lord old, rotten, or damaged fruit. For all we know, Cain’s offering was from the firstfruits of his field, even as Abel’s offering was from the fattest of his flock.

Still others contend that God took issue with the manner of Cain’s offering—that his attitude was wrong. That may have been the case. But, again, the text does not tell us what either brother’s attitude was as they presented their offerings.

All we know for sure is that one boy presented an offering that pleased the Lord and the other did not. Hebrews 11:4 says: “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.” That does not answer all of our questions, but I believe it

makes the point: the priority of true worship is to make sure God is pleased.

After worship on Sunday, a member bluntly said to the pastor, “I did not enjoy the service today.” Reciprocating the member’s bluntness, the pastor replied, “That’s okay. We weren’t worshipping you.” That response may seem overly harsh. But it is absolutely true. Worshipers constantly need this reminder. Worship is not about us. It is not about our needs, tastes, or preferences.

The worship wars of past decades argued about whether worship should focus on “seekers” or the saints. Ultimately, both sides were wrong. God is the target audience of worship. Paul exulted, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36). All things find their source, being, and purpose in God alone. Thus, God alone deserves the glory in all things. The only way we have the right to receive glory is if anything is from us, through us, or to us. We got here too late and will leave too early to claim any share in divine glory. The ultimate priority of true worship is that the Lord is pleased.

THE PERSON OF WORSHIP

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), Jesus taught that citizenship in the kingdom of heaven requires righteousness, not religiosity. Yet in Matthew 6, Jesus taught how righteous people should do religious stuff. Jesus gave instructions about the most Godward of acts: giving, prayer, and fasting (Matt. 6:1–18). He warned that we must be careful not to do these things to be seen by people. The consequence of offering worship for human consumption is severe: “You have already received your reward” (see v. 16). Jesus repeatedly admonishes us to do acts of worship before God in private. These admonitions do not forbid public, corporate acts of worship.

They warn us that worship must not become a platform to perform for people. It does not matter what people see, think, or say. It only matters that the Lord is pleased.

More than a century ago, worshipers filled the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn one Sunday to hear its famous pastor, Henry Ward Beecher. They were disappointed to find that Henry's less prominent brother, Thomas K. Beecher, filled the pulpit that day. People began to get up and walk out. As many headed for the doors, Thomas stood in the pulpit and announced, "All those who came here this morning to worship Henry Ward Beecher may withdraw from the church, but all who came to worship God may remain." Jolted to their senses, chastised worshipers returned to their pews.¹

May we never forget that we gather not to please ourselves or to please others. We worship to please the Lord. The anonymous author of Hebrews issued this call to worship: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb. 13:15–16).

Make sure the Lord is pleased with your life.

Make sure the Lord is pleased with your offering.

Make sure the Lord is pleased with your motives.

Make sure the Lord is pleased with your attitude.

Make sure the Lord is pleased with your relationships.

Chapter 2



HOW TO WORSHIP GOD

In the first word of the Ten Commandments, God commanded His people to worship Him exclusively: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). The second word is linked to the first:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Ex. 20:4–6)

There is some disagreement about how the Ten Commandments should be numbered. Roman Catholics and Lutherans read the first and second commandments as one commandment. To keep ten commandments, they call the preamble (Ex. 20:2) a commandment or divide the tenth commandment (Ex. 20:17) into two parts.

Exodus 20:3 and 4–6 record two different commands. They are

two different sides of the same coin. The first commandment is about the proper object of worship. The second commandment is about the proper mode of worship. The first commandment addresses orthodoxy (right belief). The second commandment addresses orthopraxy (right practice). The first commandment tells us whom to worship. The second commandment tells us how to worship. God says, “Worship Me alone.” Then God says, “Worship Me this way.” How we worship matters to God.

The second commandment does not prohibit God’s people from being artistic. The Lord will instruct Moses to have artisans construct the ark of the covenant with artistic elements. The Spirit of God would inspire and empower men to creatively build the tabernacle. This is not a categorical prohibition against carved images. The Lord’s concern here is liturgical, not artistic. We must not make carved images for worship.

The second commandment warns us how misguided sincerity can be. When the children of Israel danced around the golden calf, the Lord did not respond, “Look how sincere they are!” The Lord became so angry that only the passionate intercession of Moses saved their lives. God demands proper worship.

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WORSHIP GOD ON HIS TERMS

It is remarkable that the first commandment was necessary. After delivering the children of Israel from Egypt, God still needed to instruct His people not to worship false idols. The second commandment is a natural progression from the first. God disabuses His people of the assumption that it does not matter how we worship,

as long as we worship the right God. Redeemed people can still offer unacceptable worship if it is not on God's terms.

God cannot be controlled. That is what happens with carved images. A symbol makes visible what is invisible and tangible what is intangible. In so doing, the reality behind the symbol is tamed, controlled, and neutered. Why do you think there is so much controversy over the American flag? It is a symbol that points to a reality. How one treats the symbol is a statement of what one thinks about the reality it represents.

The Babylonians had to carry their gods away on wagons to flee Cyrus of Persia. Yet the Lord reminded the house of Israel that He carried them since birth and will continue to carry them and save them (Isa. 46:3–4). This is why God forbids carved images. God carries us and refuses to be put in a position where we try to carry Him.

This second word may seem irrelevant. But we need this commandment today. Many Western contemporary Christians are ancient Hebrew idolaters in disguise. We make symbols for God; then we make gods of our symbols. We profess to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, and the church. We actually worship the God of our cause, understanding, experience, race, nation, comfort, and success.

WORSHIP GOD BY DIVINE REVELATION

There are two primary ways finite man seeks to know the infinite God: by imagination or revelation. Seeking to know God by trying to imagine who He is does not work. The second commandment prohibits any attempts to shape an image of God according to who or what we think God is. Habakkuk asked, "What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless

idols!” (Hab. 2:18). The only way to know God is by revelation. We cannot imagine the nature, character, attributes, purpose, or glory of God. God must reveal Himself to us.

In a general sense, God reveals Himself in the created world. Creation advertises its Creator (Ps. 19:1). Heaven and earth proclaim the reality of God. But creation cannot declare the name of God. To know God personally, we need special revelation. God has personally revealed Himself to us in the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16). We must worship God on the basis of His revelation of Himself to us. God-pleasing worship is Word-driven worship.

When Israel met with God for the first time, they heard a voice but saw no image (Deut. 4:11–12). Moses reminded Israel of this to prepare them for the non-appearance of God. In the days to come, Israel’s worship would not be in video format. There would only be audio. They would have CDs to listen to, not DVDs to watch (Deut. 4:15–18). Worship is not about images to see. It is about words to hear. True worship is Word-based, Word-saturated, and Word-driven. We are to sing the Word, read the Word, pray the Word, preach the Word, and see the Word.

WORSHIP GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

God commands us not to make any carved images in the likeness of anything in heaven, on earth, or in the sea. Those who make images of God mar the image of God. What is the image of God? Genesis 1:26–27 says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

We are the image of God. This does not mean we have physical attributes that represent God: God is spirit (John 4:24). It means that God has given us personhood—mind, will, and emotions. We

are free moral agents who can choose between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error. Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the garden of Eden. All of humanity has fallen into sin as a result of our first parents' original sin. Mankind was doomed to live in misery, die in sin, and suffer in hell. But God sent Jesus to save us. The Lord Jesus Christ is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3).

Jesus is God in the flesh. Truly God, truly man. Paul sang, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15). Paul also said, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9). To worship God is to worship Jesus. Christian worship is Christ worship. The Lord should have supremacy in everything we say and do in worship (Col. 1:18).

On the way home from church, a child told her parents she did not want to go to Sunday school anymore. When asked why, she griped, "Because they never do anything new there. Every week it's the same thing. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." May that little child's complaint be the legitimate critique of our corporate worship services. No one should ever catch us doing something new when they attend our worship services. It should be the same thing every week, every month, every year. Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!

Chapter 3



A HIGH VIEW OF GOD

Isaiah 6 records Isaiah's life-transforming vision of God and subsequent call to prophetic ministry. It is arguably one of the most well-known passages in Isaiah's prophecy. And rightfully so, for it contains the dramatic testimony of a sinful man who had a violent encounter with God and lived to tell it. Isaiah's gaze was lifted above and beyond his physical surroundings. And he received a vision of God that changed his life immediately, completely, and permanently.

God moved Isaiah to record his testimony in Scripture as a spiritually profitable lesson. Isaiah's vision calls us to a high view of God. Though we should not expect to experience Isaiah's supernatural vision, we desperately need the exalted view of God that resulted from Isaiah's vision. We need a high view of God. A. W. Tozer wrote, "The greatest need of the moment is that lighthearted, superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with his train filling the temple."²

To worship is to ascribe worth. The legitimacy of worship is based on the worthiness of the object. You do not get

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worship right by focusing on worship. Proper worship requires divine revelation. You must see God as He truly is to worship Him as He deserves and demands. Your view of God is everything!

Jeremiah wrote:

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." (Jer. 9:23–24)

Without a proper view of God, you have nothing. Only when you see God properly will everything else be brought into focus.

Isaiah testified, "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" (Isa. 6:1). Isaiah's timestamp is critical to the vision. Uzziah was the tenth king of Judah. He took the throne at the age of sixteen and reigned for fifty-two years. King Uzziah was "marvelously helped" by God (2 Chron. 26:15), which led to political, military, and economic success. But when he became strong, he became proud. His pride led to his downfall. God struck the rebellious king with leprosy, and he died quarantined from the nation he built (2 Chron. 26:21).

In the year Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne. One way or another, every king, prime minister, president, and dictator will give up power. And when the parade of dethroned rulers is over, God will be where He has always been: sitting on His throne, high and lifted up, with His train filling the temple.

THE GLORY OF GOD

Jesus said, “God is spirit” (John 4:24). Paul said God “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). John said, “No one has ever seen God” (1 John 4:12). Yet Isaiah says, “I saw the Lord” (Isa. 6:1). Isaiah did not see God’s essential nature. He saw a vision of God’s sovereign authority (indicated by the fact that the Lord sat on a throne). The prophet declared, “My eyes have seen the King” (Isa. 6:5).

John’s gospel presents the rejection of Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah 6:10. After quoting the prophet, John wrote, “Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory” (12:41). Isaiah’s vision was a Christophany. He received a sneak preview of coming attractions. Before the incarnation of Christ, Isaiah saw the Lord Jesus enthroned in heaven. Here is a hint of the trinitarian nature of Christian worship. You cannot worship God the Father without worshiping God the Son. You cannot worship God the Son without worshiping God the Father.

In Isaiah’s vision, he saw the Lord. He also saw the seraphim. These angelic creatures had six wings each. With two wings, they flew. With four wings, they veiled their faces and feet in the presence of God. The posture of the seraphim illustrates the holiness of God. Understandably, a sinful man would feel doomed before God (Isa. 6:5). But the fear of the holy angels declares how holy the Lord is. God is not just set apart from sin. He is set apart from all creation. The angels sang, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 6:3). This antiphonal song declares the infinite holiness of God.

To say that God is holy once is enough.

To say that God is holy twice is emphatic.

To say that God is holy three times is superlative.

God is so holy that our minds cannot comprehend it and our

mouths cannot express it. To say that God is holy is to say that God is God. Holiness is the “Godness” of God. Worship that does not revere the holiness of God is not worship. It is the idolatrous veneration of a god of our own making.

In worshipping the holiness of God, the angels also declared, “The whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). This statement about the glory of God is even more remarkable than the statement about the holiness of God. Check the news. The earth is full of evil, violence, racism, corruption, perversity, and folly. But the angels do

not view the world based on the news of the day. They view the world in light of the holiness of God. Because God is God alone, angels rightly declare the earth is filled with the glory of God.

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This holy vision of God brought Isaiah to an end of himself. He lamented, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). When you see God as He truly is, you will see yourself as you are. True worship is transformative. But transformation happens in worship not because that is our goal. We change in worship as we behold the glory of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18).

THE ALTAR OF GOD

In the middle of Isaiah’s vision, the heavenly furniture shifts. The focus on the throne (Isa. 6:1–4) becomes a focus on the altar (Isa. 6:6). Eternal punishment happens when there is a throne without an altar, holiness without grace, guilt without forgiveness. But God is a God of holiness and love. We will never be amazed by grace without beholding the holiness of God. When the vision of

God's holiness convicts us of our sinfulness, we will not need to be pumped and primed to worship. It will be the overflow of glad and grateful hearts that are trophies of grace.

The forgiveness of Isaiah's sin was a work of God's grace. His guilt was taken away; his sin was atoned for. Isaiah had nothing to do with the new beginning he received. God did it all! But that did not mean there was no work for Isaiah to do. After his cleansing, Isaiah overheard a heavenly conversation: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isa. 6:8).

Isaiah was a part of this conversation. He knew that he should have died in his sin. Mercy and grace spared him. Divine forgiveness deserved total devotion. So Isaiah butted in, saying, "Here I am! Send me." Isaiah did not know what the mission would be. (In Isa. 6:9–13, he would find out that it was a difficult assignment.) But that did not matter. A high view of God caused him to conclude that the Lord could never ask too much of him.

What is your view of God?