On Seeing Children Seeing

Viewing life selectively,
filtering out the dross
of intellectual incompatibility
and emotional divergence,
frees the mind to fabricate
a systematic universe
where Adam Smith or Karl Marx
would both feel quite at home,
but only children see the lightning bugs
on a summer’s evening
while their parents talk about
the Fed and APR.

—Harry Lee Poe
We live at a time when the whole concept of sin is largely discarded and gone from the popular culture. Unfortunately, due to generations of legalistic Christians, sin is primarily viewed as a matter of breaking the rules. In that sort of legalism, if people come along who no longer believe in the rules, then where is sin? Going back to the experiences of those who played a pivotal role in our understanding of faith helps to regain a sense of what it means to come into the presence of God. Only in the presence of God do we have a consciousness of what sin really means. The previous chapter referred to the request of Moses to see God's glory. In Exodus 33:18–20 we find Moses asking for the only thing he really wanted. He did not want a kingdom. He did not want land. He did not want to be rich. He did not ask for a big family. He did not ask for a lot of the things that people in the Old Testament usually asked for. He wanted one thing: to see the glory of God in all his fullness. He wanted to see his Lord whom he had been serving.

Kept from the Glory

It is very important to understand God's response to this request because it has been mispreached through the years. A paraphrase of the misrepresentation might be, "God said, 'If you look at me, I will kill you.'" But God is not threatening Moses at this point. He is explaining why he keeps
himself hidden from the world. Moses could not stand to see God. It would be too much. God actually said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

An interesting collection of parallel ideas appears in this passage. Moses asks to see God's glory. God says that he will cause his goodness to pass before Moses, but that Moses cannot see his face. So "glory," "goodness," and "face" are all metaphors that God uses to speak of himself. In this context, the use of the word face is what theologians call anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism means that we impose a human characteristic or trait or feature on God, or that we call a characteristic of God by a human feature. We do this in ordinary life as well. We do it with furniture and other sorts of things. For instance, we speak of the neck of a bottle, the leg of a table, the arm of a chair, the face of a clock, the back of a cupboard, the hands of a watch, the head of a nail, the nose of an airplane, an ear of corn, the eye of a needle, the foot of a bed, the mouth of a river. By analogy the Bible also speaks of God in human terms. The Bible speaks of the "hand" of God (Exod. 3:20), the "eyes" of God (34:9), the "nostrils" of God (15:8), the "mouth" of God (Deut. 8:3), the "arm" of God (Exod. 6:6), the "ear" of God (Deut. 1:45), the "back" of God (Exod. 33:23), the "breath" of God (15:10), and the "finger" of God (31:18), to name but a few. The danger comes when we take the analogy too seriously, or too literally. Whenever we say anything about God by analogy, we need to remember that God is not that!

The great theologian, Augustine, who lived fifteen hundred years ago, refused to take Christianity seriously before his conversion because of all of these anthropomorphisms in the Bible. He thought Christians believed God was a physical being. He would not take God seriously until he heard Ambrose, the great bishop of Milan, who explained to him that the descriptions of God in the Bible were metaphors. When the Bible speaks of the eye of God, it is intending to show that God is aware of everything. Just as we see things, God knows, God is aware. When the Bible speaks of the ear of God, it means that God hears, but he does not need eardrums to hear.

In this context, God lets Moses know that he cannot behold God's face, the full experience of God, and survive it. God is so different from us that

we really cannot conceive of God. We are hindered from perceiving God. This is why we say God is invisible. He withholds himself from us. He is not speaking in anger or in a threatening way to Moses. In fact, what we see in this encounter between God and Moses, and throughout the whole Old Testament and into the New Testament, is the length to which God goes to make it possible finally for people to behold him face-to-face.

To borrow a term from the divorce courts, humans are incompatible with the glory of God. We can see this sort of incompatibility at work in the world at a more pedestrian level. When I was in the sixth grade, Mr. Jordan, our teacher, told us one day of a story he had read in the newspaper. A man had a large German shepherd that had been running on a hot summer afternoon. The man thought he would do a good deed for his pet and turned the cold water from his garden hose on the animal in the hundred-degree heat. The dog immediately had a heart attack and died. I was reminded of this story some years later by my girlfriend, after I had graduated from college. She lived in the South Carolina low country near Savannah where the weather rarely gets below forty degrees. One day, however, they suffered a natural disaster and the temperature plunged to the freezing point. A thin skin of ice appeared on the surface of the water in the swimming pool. My girlfriend’s little brother thought he would do a good deed for his pet, a three-foot-long alligator that he kept in the family swimming pool. His alligator was quite stiff, so he took it inside and dumped it into a piping-hot bath. As with the German shepherd, the shock of moving from one state of existence to another was more than the animal could stand. It died.

Glory

In the modern world, the concept of glory is easily misunderstood because of the cultural disconnection between now and the time when people easily spoke of glory. In ancient times humans had their counterpart to the divine glory. Great leaders ascribed glory to themselves. Heroes went off on quests to seek glory for themselves. Great battles were fought for the sake of glory. This concept of human glory probably continued until World War I, when warfare lost all its charm. People no longer go off in search of glory. Instead, they go off in search of themselves.

Glory is a difficult concept because it involves so many different dimensions. One aspect of it relates to reputation or fame. This is an aspect of
glory that humans can imitate. Another aspect of glory involves power. Likewise, humans can exercise power. The quest for power, the thirst for power, and the ability to exercise power are themes that have run through the human story to the present day. In all of these, however, humans strive to achieve glory. Ironically, the glory they achieve is transitory, like a fading flower. It is the glory of the film star of ten years ago. Worse, still, it is the glory of the TV star of last year. Worst of all, it is the pop singer from your parents' generation who sings at county fairs to relive "the glory days." Human glory is insubstantial. It motivates people to build monuments to themselves in order to somehow perpetuate their fifteen minutes of fame.

It does no good to argue that most people do not seek glory. It is not necessary to seek glory for oneself to seek glory. We may seek glory for our football team or our ethnic group. In its most sinister form we see it in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Nazi Germany. It is not merely a problem for the evil forces of the world, but also for the forces that conceive of themselves as good. In a film that examined the life of Robert S. McNamara, the U.S. secretary of defense during the Vietnam War, Errol Morris explored the American fire bombings and use of the atomic bomb against civilian Japanese targets during World War II. As Morris interviewed McNamara about the nature of warfare in our time, an issue emerged that has been with humans since the dawn of the race. It is the problem of enemies, why we have them and how we deal with them. Morris also identified a number of life lessons. Among these lessons, Morris observed that rationality cannot save us. Rational individuals came close to causing the total destruction of society during the Cuban missile crisis. For Morris, however, the last of the lessons is the most despairing: we cannot change human nature. In a radio interview, I heard Morris remark that if we cannot change human nature, "Uh-oh.")

We may seek glory for our religion, which is quite a different thing altogether from seeking glory for God. We can seek glory for our children as we live our lives through them. The way we seek glory illustrates the profound power of the concept of substitution whereby we accomplish some
satisfying spiritual experience through someone else who acts on our behalf. It happens all the time. We may transfer our allegiance to heroes in our own chosen field of interest as they win glory vicariously for us. The heroes of old fought the battles for others and won glory that the whole tribe shared in their common victory over the losers, those lesser beings. The gossip magazines at the checkout counter of the grocery store do a booming business based on the number of people who live their lives through the stars who have won glory. When the glory fades, we transfer our allegiance because we need a sure source for glory. We collect autographs and stand in line to see famous persons who have achieved glory. To bask in their glory allows us to say that we saw them, touched them, and partook of the glory that emanated from their being. We do not actually say these things out loud, however, because it all sounds too ridiculous and embarrassing if we were ever to face up to it. Such is the frailty of human nature.

Human nature has a fragility about it like clay pots. The Bible often uses the metaphor of the pot to describe the relationship of humans to God, the pot to the potter (Isa. 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer. 25:34; 18:1–10). Even the creation of people is described as the act of a potter (Gen. 2:7). Pottery breaks. Notice a clay pot from a nursery or garden center. Examine the fine grain just barely perceptible under the smooth surface. These are the fault lines where the clay was folded over. These are the weak points. Along these flaws, the pots break when pressure is placed upon them. Hit them too hard, and they will shatter along the faults. People are like pots in that we all have fault lines running through our lives, and they are different for every person. Every experience of life folds over and we have a new fault line. We live with them fairly well until the pressures of life come to bear. Sometimes we chip. Sometimes we break. Sometimes we shatter.

One of the most tragic aspects of human nature is to crave what is not a part of us by nature. We crave fame, power, and physical perfection. We crave and seek what does not come naturally. We aspire to the nature of God. We are not satisfied with our nature as we are made. We pursue the tinsel and rhinestone, shoddy imitations of glory. In its extreme form, the pharaohs of Egypt built pyramids to proclaim their glory. Every culture has ways of doing it. We want to share God’s glory by mimicking it. Bear in mind that it is not necessary to believe in God or to worship God to mimic God. Joseph Stalin intentionally mimicked God, though he did not believe in God. It is also possible to mimic God while being totally unaware of it.
Where does the desire for glory come from? It is a strange thing to crave. A materialist could suggest a theory that would account for how a craving for glory has favored the human race in its evolution, but such a theory does not satisfy. The great epic poems and sagas, the novels and dramas of historic civilization document the tragic flaw of human hubris. Why do we do it? Is it like thirst? Is there something that can satisfy the desire for glory?

Few people contemplate the problem of desire. The Buddha contemplated it in terms of the problem of suffering and concluded that suffering is the result of desire that comes as a result of physical existence. His solution was that if the physical world did not exist as something separate, then we would have no desire. He proposed a disciplined approach to life that sought release from physical consciousness. By denying the existence of the physical world, desire would have no place. But what if the physical world actually exists? C. S. Lewis contemplated the same issue but understood that behind the desire for gratification through the physical world lay a deeper longing for . . . something. Part of the dilemma lies in not knowing what that something is. Most people suppress the longing, preferring to indulge the desires that quickly fill the mind and heart. The experience of longing only breaks through occasionally, but Lewis longed for the longing that could not be satisfied. It told him something, but he did not know what. Something was there, but he did not know what. Most people prefer to grasp for their moment’s glory rather than to know their longing.

In an age of great posturing, the prophet Isaiah delivered an unwelcome message to the people of Judah and their officials. God does not share his glory with anyone (Isa. 42:8; 48:11). It is inseparable from God. Ascribing glory to something other than God, whether it be a person, an aspect of nature, or a work of art, constitutes a form of idolatry. This uniqueness of glory in relationship to God is embodied in the first of the commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

Holiness

Inextricably related to the glory of God is another concept that has virtually no meaning in the modern world. Linked with the glory of God is the holiness of God. Holiness is a unique term for God among the ancient He-

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brew people.\textsuperscript{5} They frequently used terms from everyday life to describe the activity of God, such as king, shepherd, and judge. They used metaphorical language to describe the activity of God, such as the anthropomorphisms we have already discussed. Holiness, however, stands alone in the Hebrew language. It is a word that refers only to God. It speaks of the uniqueness of God and the separateness of God. It distinguishes God from everything else, thus eliminating any identification of God with nature or people. Holiness creates a barrier of understanding that the human mind cannot cross or penetrate. We refer to this utter unfathomableness of God as mystery. True mystery can never be known unless it is disclosed. It is beyond finding out. It can only be revealed.

On a limited scale, we experience this idea of separateness on a human level. Marriage itself represents the mystery of not knowing someone whom we know to be there. We can be fully aware of the existence of someone with whom we have a close relationship, yet we cannot truly know them unless they choose to disclose themselves to us. We cannot penetrate the veil. We can imagine what they are thinking, as many wives are forced to do because of their silent husbands. Philosophers have tried to imagine their way to God since ancient times. We cannot know God, any more than a frustrated wife can know her husband, unless God reveals himself. The husband and wife may share the same mode of physical existence and the same forms of life, yet they are cut off from each other. How much more the degree of separation between humans and God? For some people, sex is enough. They confuse sex with a personal relationship with and intimate knowledge of another person. This sexual view of human relationships corresponds to the spiritual experience view of a relationship with God. All people are capable of spiritual experience because we are spiritual as well as physical beings. We should be no more surprised by spiritual experience than by physical experience. People all over the world confuse their spiritual experience with a relationship with God the same way some people confuse a physical relationship with love or marriage. They are not the same. They may happen, but they are not necessarily self-authenticating. An inappropriate spiritual experience is just as possible as an inappropriate physical experience.

\textsuperscript{5} Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Theology of the Old Testament} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 288.
Rudolf Otto has written that people all over the world have the experience of holiness. He refers to it as a mysterious experience that involves a tremendous sense of fear in the presence of something powerful that may be quite dangerous coupled with a fascination that draws us toward it. In his teaching that the essence of religion lies in the feeling of absolute dependence, Friedrich Schleiermacher stressed that spiritual experience should be understood as the same thing as being in relation with God. Surely Schleiermacher is mistaken. While people all over the world may have spiritual experience with the one and only God, we presume too much if we suppose that God is the only spiritual being with whom people may have experiences. We also tend to confuse the encounter with the veil of God as an encounter with the one who lives beyond the veil. Spiritual experience may be real, but its reality corresponds to bumping into someone and feeling the jolt of the impact. What happens next? We interpret our experience, what it means, and the nature of what we have encountered. We fall back on our imaginations unless the Holy One speaks. We often flatter ourselves by supposing that we fall back on our intellects, but it is really only our imaginations.

Some years ago I was a prison chaplain. Among those who attended chapel was a man who once had a profound spiritual experience. An angel of light had come to him with a message from God. The angel said that he was to be tested to see if his love for God was greater than any other love. The angel said he must kill his wife, which he dutifully did. Was this a valid spiritual experience, or was it the exercise of the human mind? It is easy to call this man crazy, but it happens with people who are perfectly sane. A famous minister with a national television ministry and various philanthropies announced a few years ago that God had revealed to him that if he did not raise a certain large sum of money within a certain period of time, God would take his life. As the ministry unraveled, many people made the judg-

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ment that the preacher had put words in God’s mouth. Dreadful horrors have been committed in the name of God by zealous people whose minds have interpreted religious experience to gratify the desires of the flesh. From war to bigotry to deceit to vanity, the human mind will justify any action on the basis of its interpretation of a spiritual experience. Spiritual experience is never self-authenticating. We may know we have had an experience, but how do we respond?

The Bible contrasts the nature of God with the nature of people. People are like the morning mist that rises from a creek or pond. It is lovely in its own way, but when it is exposed to the brilliance of the sun, it fades away and disappears. Its nature is incompatible with the brilliance of the sun. People are like vigorous blades of grass that spring up only to fade and dry up (Ps. 90:5–6). The grass is mown and burned in the fire. The dry grass is incompatible with the nature of fire. It cannot continue as it is in the presence of fire. The fire will overwhelm it. So it is with the holiness of God. People cannot exist in the presence of God as they are. They must be changed into the same nature as God. They must become compatible with the nature of God, just as one flame dances with another in a fire. On the Day of Pentecost, a great Jewish festival that comes fifty days after Passover, the followers of Jesus experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus. Those who were there said it was like having a flame proceeding from the head of each member of the church, as though they were all lamps or candles, each one a flame within a great fire, each one partaking of the holiness of God.

The Dreadfulness of God

Many people conceive of God in dreadful terms. The experience of the divine around the world in different cultures in different ages has been accompanied with fear and dread. The universal practice of sacrifice was intended in all cultures to appease the divine as different cultures conceived of it.

As we observed in chapter 2, the last judgment is not a court trial. The Day of the Lord as the ancient Hebrews understood it was a dreadful day in which God would appear. If no one can look upon the face of God and live, then the day that God appears is a dreadful one. Isaiah experienced dread when he had his vision of God calling him to prophesy to Judah. In his
spiritual experience, Isaiah not only experienced a revelation of God behind the veil, but he also experienced a revelation of himself:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two wings they covered their feet, and with two wings they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (Isa. 6:1–5)

Connected with Isaiah’s sense of dread that comes with his vision is an accompanying sense of vileness and pollution. Isaiah, who at the time was officiating in the temple as a priest of God, adorned in the ceremonial priestly garments, feels dirty. The experience of the glory of God brings self-awareness to people because they have a basis for comparison. They have the ultimate basis for value to which everything else is relative. Compared to the other priests and the people of Judah, Isaiah does not feel dirty, but compared to the glory of God, he does. God takes the initiative to relieve Isaiah’s anxiety by sending an angel with a burning coal from the altar that purifies Isaiah of sin. The vision has similarities with those experienced by Daniel, Ezekiel, and John. In each case the prophets are given glimpses of eternity through heavily veiled metaphorical imagery. Thus, the prophets do not die upon seeing God, because they do not see God; they only receive a vision full of representational images. For instance, the cleansing properties of fire are applied to the problem of the incompatibility of sin with the presence of God. Sin is consumed by fire. Fire as an image of the presence of God appears throughout the Bible. God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. A column of fire guided the people of Israel by night during their wilderness wanderings. Elijah was caught up by a chariot of fire.
If the experience of a vision of God was a dreadful thing for Isaiah, what would it be like to have a full experience of God? With this thought in mind, Malachi asked, “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap” (Mal. 3:2). A refiner’s fire melts crushed rock to separate the base stone from the pure metal. The rock is heated to a tremendous temperature until it melts. The elements separate under the heat. The pure metal is kept and the slag is poured out onto the ground. This is the image Malachi gives of what it will be like to appear before the presence of God: individuals are like crushed stone and God is like the refiner’s fire. Notice that God does not throw anyone into the fire. Rather, he is like fire to people by his and our very natures. Malachi continues with his prophecy of the Day of the Lord:

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the L ORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the L ORD Almighty. (Mal. 4:1–3)

Two groups of people will experience presence with God in dramatically different ways. For some people, being with God is like being burned in a furnace, but for others it will be like healing that finally comes to a wounded body.

Here we have the ultimate relativism in which everything is turned upside down. How we experience God does not depend so much on the nature of God but upon our own attitude toward God. The Absolute remains absolute, but we have the capacity to create our own images, values, distortions, and corruptions of the divine. Thus, we may experience the beauty of God as horror or the goodness of God as badness because of how we have so disoriented ourselves through our own reconstruction of values in our own minds.

People like to brush up against the mystery of God, but they do not particularly like the idea of knowing what lies behind the mystery. It is too dangerous. We have too much to lose. What if we like what we find and have to give up what we have always preferred? For the most part, we prefer
to fall short of the glory of God, so we can bask in our own glory without fear of being overshadowed. We can make up our own rules or not have any rules at all.

Sharing the Glory of God

If we follow this theme of beholding the glory of the Lord into the New Testament we find that the angel of the Lord came upon a group of shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus, and the glory of the Lord shown around them (Luke 2:8–14). They were so afraid. Remember the shepherds the night Jesus was born? We do not have a full picture of the Lord of glory, but just enough of the glory to scare the daylights out of the shepherds. What was the word from the angel of the Lord? Fear not. The glory of the Lord is something we misunderstand if we even think about it at all. When the apostle Paul came to describe and define the meaning of sin, he did not talk about the offense to God’s honor. He did not talk about the rebellion of humanity. He did not talk about breaking the rules. What he said was that sin is a matter of coming “short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). I have heard preachers say that coming short of the glory of God is really not strong enough to describe sin. It does not get down to the offense to God’s honor and dignity. If you do not think that falling short of the glory of God is strong enough, then you have no sense of the majesty and beauty and perfection and unutterable delight of the glory of God. To fall short of the glory of God is a catastrophe.

We often think of Paul as the great legalist, but a careful reading of Paul does not leave him as a legalist. Paul has gained a reputation as a legalist in the modern period because of our tendency to focus on issues that have recently undergone a cultural value revision, such as sexual behavior. We pick out some things that Paul says while we ignore some of the other things that he said about sin. It makes it easy for us to point at certain people and say they are sinners because Paul talked about what they do.

Paul said a great deal about the manifestation of sin, but he usually spoke about the way it affects the lives of “nice” people. It is amazing how rarely we have public crusades and marches about envy. Have you ever seen a boycott related to pride or gossip? We could boycott most churches just on the basis of gossip alone. Paul made general statements about the various ways sin manifests itself in different lives, but we tend to fixate on the rarest
ones as the ones deserving of outrage. The common ones we have learned to tolerate and accept, because these are the ways sin manifests itself in the lives of “nice” people. So we all find ourselves in the unfortunate position of falling short of the glory of God.

Being short of the glory of God is the state all people try to muddle through. At the very best we are only muddling through. Some of us muddle through better than others. The eight years I spent as a prison chaplain helped me tremendously in getting over legalism as the proper way to understand sin. It is easy to think of those who go to prison for their sins as sinners, but what happens when you are presented an award or given praise and attention for your sin, because that happens in this world as well. What if you are rewarded for your sin, financially or with homage by others? Instead of comparing ourselves with those poor people in the prison, let us compare ourselves with the wondrous God of creation who made this wonderful day. Let us compare ourselves with God who allowed his goodness to pass by Moses.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul goes back to the experience of Moses when he was not allowed to behold the glory of God. Instead, God placed him in a crack of the rock and allowed his fullness, his beauty, his goodness to pass by. All Moses got was the reflection off the rocks. Of course, rocks do not reflect a great deal, not like a mirror, yet when Moses came down from the mountain, his face shone with such brilliance that he had to put a veil over it to protect the eyes of the people. Paul tells us in contrast, that “we all, with unveiled face, [are] beholding the glory of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18 RSV). He tells us this, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17–18 NIV). We are as different from God as Pinocchio was from a real live boy, but the Lord of creation who made this day desires to re-create us from the inside out by his Spirit dwelling in us and making us into his likeness. He does this so that we can have fellowship with him and behold his glory, face-to-face. If human nature is incompatible with God, such that the two cannot be in full proximity to each other without serious harm to people, then human nature must change.

Whereas Moses could not even behold the full glory of God, Jesus Christ came into the world in order that people may not only behold the glory of
God, but also share it. The previous chapter explored a bit of the difference between the old covenant that God offered to Israel through Moses and the new covenant that God offered the world through Jesus Christ. The old covenant involved laws that made people aware of their sinfulness, but the new covenant involves the transformation of people. The new covenant involves the promise of God to change human nature into something new. By the same power of creativity through which God created the world and continues to uphold it, he promises to change a person from a creation that falls short of his glory to a child who shares his glory. In order to come into the presence of God, a person must be enabled to endure pure holiness. The promise of the new covenant is that the Spirit of God will take hold of a person and change him or her into a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

The New Birth

When Jesus came preaching in the hills of Palestine, he caused quite a stir. He attracted a crowd because of the amazing things that he did. The lame were raised to walk, the blind received sight, lepers were cleansed, and other things that are not supposed to happen did happen. He had all the signs of a prophet, for in earlier times, God had confirmed the message of prophets by performing miraculous signs through them. Had he not given ten signs to Pharaoh through Moses? Had he not done impossible things through Elijah and Elisha? Had the judges of Israel not been endowed with extraordinary powers and abilities when the Spirit of the Lord came upon them?

On one occasion a leader of the Pharisees, who was also a member of the prestigious religious body known as the Sanhedrin, came to Jesus to ask him about his teachings. Nicodemus reasoned that Jesus was sent from God because of the signs. Instead of discussing the Law, however, which is what a teacher of that day would have taught, Jesus told Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). When this statement confused Nicodemus, Jesus elaborated:

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” The wind blows wherever it
pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (3:5–8).

People cannot exist in the presence of God as they are. In Hebrews the matter is put succinctly: “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (12:14). How can people acquire holiness, which is a unique characteristic of God? Some change must take place, but people cannot change themselves. The leopard cannot change its spots, and people cannot change the way they are (Jer. 13:23). Yet Jesus promised that the pure in heart would see God (Matt. 5:8). How does a heart become pure and a person holy? In this conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus explained that God will cause the transformation through his Spirit.

Jesus used three terms in this passage that would have been quite familiar to a student of the Scriptures like Nicodemus. Water, wind, and Spirit all refer to the same thing. In the Law and the Prophets of the Scriptures of Israel, water and wind were both used as metaphors for the Spirit of God. In fact, the Hebrew word for spirit (ruach) is also the word for wind or breath. Whereas our eighth-grade English teachers teach us not to mix our metaphors, the Hebrew Scriptures mix metaphors as a matter of course because no single word image can adequately convey the majesty of God. As a result, both fire and water are metaphors for the Spirit of the Lord. We have already seen a few of the references to fire. In his vision of the temple, Ezekiel described water flowing forth that became a mighty river (Ezek. 47:1–12). He also spoke of the future when God would cleanse people of sin by sprinkling them with “clean water” (36:25). This cleansing would involve giving people a new heart. (The prophets used the word heart as a metaphor for the human spirit, just as they used water and fire as metaphors for the Spirit of the Lord.) Now Ezekiel explains that this cleansing of sin that involves receiving a new heart means that God will put his Spirit in those who seek him (36:27). When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, he was calling up the imagery of the prophets of Israel about a future promise that God had given by which he would change the human heart.

God had visited the prophets with his Spirit. For brief periods, the Spirit of God rested upon them and they had a powerful brush with God. Then the Spirit departed. The prophets relayed a promise from God, however, that in the future the Spirit of the Lord would come to huge numbers of
people without the old traditional barriers of status that had characterized human society:

And afterward,
   I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
   your old men will dream dreams,
   your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
   I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

—Joel 2:28–29

The image is of water being poured out from above. The phrase "born again" that English translations of the Bible use in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is a traditional phrase kept alive by custom. The actual phrase in the Greek is "born from above." In other words, Jesus was reminding Nicodemus that God had promised one day to change human nature by an outpouring of himself upon people. God would transform people the same way his Spirit had moved upon the face of the deep in the beginning when he transformed the empty void into the universe (Gen. 1:2).

Jesus used the same imagery of water when he spoke to a Samaritan woman about the future promise of God. A deep-seated ethnic hatred between Jews and Samaritans prevented them from worshiping the same God of Abraham together. The woman represented both Jew and Samaritan and most of the other people of the earth with her preoccupation with the ritualistic forms of religion rooted in the two cultic worship centers of the two ethnic groups. Jesus refused to talk about religion with the woman of Samaria beside Jacob’s well just as he had refused to discuss the Law with Nicodemus. Instead, he focused on her spiritual condition: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10). His statement recalls the words of the prophet Jeremiah over five hundred years earlier:

My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
   the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.
—Jer. 2:13

Again, water is the image of God who gives life, just as water brings life to the desert. Jesus then explained to the Samaritan woman what it means for the Spirit of God to take up residence in a person:

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:13–14)

The promise of the new covenant is that God himself will take hold of people and change their very natures from children of the dust to children of God.

Jesus also used the metaphor of water to describe the effect of the Holy Spirit upon people. At the end of an observance of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus told the crowd, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:37–38).8 When John recorded these words of Jesus, he added a note of explanation: “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified” (7:39). Jesus made clear that the reception of the Holy Spirit is a relational matter and it involves relating to Jesus who had entered the world of human experience.

As we have seen, people tend to distort their religious experiences. We make God into our own image. We justify ourselves based on our feelings. With an impenetrable barrier between people and God, how can people ever come to know God and experience fellowship with God? God would have to take the initiative. People would have to experience God at a level they can understand. Over ages of time, people have had spiritual close

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8. The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths occurred in the fall and lasted for a week as a harvest festival. It involved drawing water in a container on the first day of the feast that would last for the entire festival. Perhaps in this context, as the water had begun to run out on the last day of the feast, Jesus invited the crowd to draw a perpetual source of water.
encounters with God as God makes himself known through creation. These encounters involve the experiences of wonder and awe that people have with creation. Awe alone, however, gives us no basis for understanding right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsity. We may have a sense of these things, but we are left to ourselves to sort it out. Without the glory and holiness of God, human efforts along these lines have failed. In time, God made his character and expectations known to prophets, but all this did was to make people aware of the impossibility of living up to the expectations of God. Now the stage was set for God to do something quite dramatic. If people cannot come into his presence as people, he would go into the presence of people as a human. So God entered the world as every other person had: he was born into it.

Luke gives an account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Part of the story involves a visitation of angels to shepherds to announce the birth. We are told that the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds, heavily filtered through an angel of the Lord. In this case, the angel mediated as much glory as the shepherds could stand. John does not include an account of the birth of Jesus, but he explains its significance in terms of the revelation of the glory of God. People communicate through words rather than feelings. John speaks of Jesus as the Word of God through whom God makes himself clearly known and reveals his glory: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). By coming into the world in a form compatible with human experience, God removed the veil of separation.

Jesus demonstrated a life that did not fall short of the glory of God. Rather, he demonstrated what it means to experience both the glory and the holiness of God. He demonstrated what it means to be close to God. He came into the world in order to become the mediator between humans and God who brings the two together. As he prepared his followers for his death the night before his crucifixion, Jesus assured them that it was a good thing for him to go away. If he did not go away, the Holy Spirit would not come (John 16:7). Once Jesus was gone, however, the Holy Spirit would come and live within them. Jesus explained that when the Holy Spirit comes over a person, both Jesus and his Father would make their homes within that person (14:23). Statements like these are the basis for the idea of the Trinity by which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one.
The change of nature happens immediately, yet it involves a lifetime. As soon as the Holy Spirit begins to change a person, that person has been enveloped by God. The difference between a person who falls short of the glory of God and one who has been immersed in the Holy Spirit is a greater difference than the difference between an inorganic chemical compound and the simplest form of life. Once sparked, however, the change begins like the change that dough undergoes when infused with yeast (Luke 13:20–21). Over time, the yeast transforms the whole lump. This process of being made holy is called by its Latin name, *sanctification*. The change over time is in keeping with the frailty of human nature and preserves the individual personality. It corresponds to the physical process of decompression by which a scuba diver must rise from the depths slowly to avoid serious injury or death.

Paul compares this change over time to a race. Unlike most races, however, everyone in the race wins (1 Cor. 9:24–27; Phil. 3:12–14; 2 Tim. 4:6–8). We do not compete against one another but with our own self and who we were yesterday. Made in the image of God, through the new birth we become conformed to the image of Christ Jesus who made God known. Furthermore, we will behold the Lord and when we see him, we will be like him (1 John 3:2). In the final picture in the book of Revelation, the Father and the Son share a throne from which flows the river of the water of life and round about them are gathered people from all nations. The unity of God is seen, however, in the words that describe the scene. God and the Lamb are seated on the throne and *his* servants serve *him*. One would expect to read "*their* servants serve *them*." Instead, God and the Lamb are one. The description goes on to say that the servants will see *his* face. In the end, God intends for people not only to see him fully, but also to share his holiness and his very life.