

SEARCHING FOR THE SACRED

*Thou has created us for thyself, and
our hearts are restless until they rest
in thee.*

■ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, the magazine *Psychology Today* devoted a fascinating article and a full page of photographs to one of the country's most successful commodities traders, Philip John Neimark.

Neimark, the article pointed out, holds several honorary doctorates and is considered in many circles to be one of the sharpest businessmen in America. At the time of the article, he managed some \$40 million in investments with an average return of 20 percent per year.

The article's focus, however, wasn't on Neimark's impressive business credentials but on his religion. He is a high priest of the ancient African religion Ifa. One photograph showed him dressed in his embroidered ceremonial robe in his converted garage, where he prays and makes animal sacrifices to the deity Orunmila.¹

Personally, I was amazed that a man of such education and stature in the business world would be drawn toward this type of religion. This just didn't fit with my picture of people who were vulnerable to the influence of cults. But Philip John Neimark is obviously not one of the vulnerable. So, I wondered, what attracted him to this?

Despite his success and achievements, in reality he really isn't so different from the millions in our world who are dissatisfied with their careers, unfulfilled in their relationships, and disillusioned with their government and other institutions. Like the rest of us who so often struggle just to get through life, Neimark probably sensed that something was missing—something that power, success, and money couldn't provide.

I believe that Philip Neimark was searching for the sacred, but like so many others today—including many professing Christians—he was looking in profane places.

WHEN PROFANE REPLACES SACRED

Sigmund Freud once predicted that as humanity embraced science, we would lose interest in spiritual things. But I think that exactly the opposite has taken place. I believe that now, more than ever, people are looking for meaning in the spiritual. We may use phrases such as "trying to find myself" or "looking for meaning in life" or even "trying to find God." But when we get right down to it, we are looking for some-

thing sacred, something “set apart” that we can build and order our lives around.

Each of us has a hunger in our hearts for what is truly sacred—for a personal relationship with God. We have a God-created hole in each of our hearts that only our Creator can fill. And nothing else—not alternative religions, not science, not careers or possessions or relationships—can truly satisfy our hungry spirits. Truth be told, these often leave us more unfulfilled and needy than before.

But still we look for the sacred in profane places. Is this unique to our generation, our sped-up, industrialized century? No, it’s a human tendency that runs throughout all of history. In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, we see exactly this kind of spiritual condition, even in God’s own people.

Isaiah was a powerful prophet of God, one of the greatest in the history of Israel. For over sixty years, through the reigns of four kings, he confronted, comforted, and called the people of Judah to repentance. His was a time of national, international, political, personal, and spiritual crisis. God had warned him that his task would not be easy:

“Go, and tell this people:
‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive;
Keep on looking, but do not understand.’
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Their ears dull,
And their eyes dim.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,
And repent and be healed." (Isaiah 6:9–10)

This is the tragic picture of a people God had greatly blessed but who were spiritually deaf, blind, and insensitive. They couldn't hear their heavenly Father when He spoke to them, and they couldn't see Him and the wonderful works He had done for them. They had filled themselves with idolatry, injustice, the pursuit of wealth, drunkenness, and illicit sexual pleasures.

I don't want to give you the impression that this was a hopeless situation. Far from it! In fact, in the midst of all this spiritual insensitivity, Isaiah had an overwhelmingly sacred encounter with God.

AT THE THRONE OF THE TRULY SACRED

I doubt that Isaiah could have prepared in any way for what would happen that day. He didn't go to the temple thinking he would actually see God or hear His voice—at least not in such a spectacular fashion. Isaiah was just doing what he had done countless times before: simply going to the temple to pray.

But he was about to have an encounter with the sacred like none he had ever had before. He stood at the doorway of the temple, looking through the outer court into the Holy Place. Then everything around him suddenly began to dissolve as the throne of God

came into view. The base of the throne sat on the ground, and the top of it stretched toward the heavens. Smoke and fire filled the temple, six-winged heavenly beings called seraphim flew over the throne of God singing praises, and the whole temple began quaking at the sound of God's voice (see 6:1–4).

If you've ever endured a strong earthquake, you know that feeling of terror (although some of my friends in southern California claim they're used to it by now). It's as if the ground beneath you turns to quivering jelly, and your heart pounds as you realize you are completely helpless. Everything around you rocks and rolls, and there is nothing you can do and nowhere you can hide. You are truly at the mercy of nature's fury.

If you add to that kind of terror a vision of almighty God Himself on His throne, of unearthly beings singing His praises, of smoke and fire, and of God's thunderous voice, you can only begin to understand the awe and fear Isaiah surely felt that day.

Isaiah had a revelation of God as He is. "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple" was all he could say (v. 1). This description of God's glory speaks of His sovereignty, His authority, His potency, and His overwhelming glory.

It's an awesome picture, but this is the kind of vision each of us searchers needs to hold of God. It's a view of what is truly sacred! And it's a vision we can have for ourselves if we but search in the right places with the right motivation.

I believe that the vast majority of Christians do things to “seek God,” but we have no real idea why we are doing them. Many of us go to church on Sundays because that’s what we do in our culture, because it’s the Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical, or Church of Christ thing to do. We spend our time reading the Bible and praying because that is what “good Christians” do. We do these things because we were raised to do them, because we want to be better people, because we want to improve our marriages, because we want our children to have a good foundation for life.

Well, is this so wrong? Not at all. Desiring these things is healthy and right. But, and you knew a *but* was coming, they should never be our primary purpose for going to church, reading our Bibles, or praying. When we approach God with these things as our primary motivation, we actually walk away from our so-called spiritual experiences unchanged and without a revelation of the sacred.

Our desire and prayer, instead, should be to get a vision of God so overwhelming that we can do nothing but get on our faces before Him. When that happens, everything else will dissolve and the glory of the living God will come into view.

Let’s take a moment to consider who and what Isaiah saw, how he responded to that vision, and what it means to us today.

First, there’s the Lord’s throne. That throne must be a wondrous and overwhelming sight, but that’s not what we should be caught up in. Rather, our atten-

tion needs to be turned toward the beauty and splendor of the One who sits on that throne.

God's posture and position on His throne shows us some wonderful things about Him. It reveals His absolute authority, sovereignty, and potency. Our God, the One who is truly sacred, is ruler over everything and every other ruler. His rule is absolutely independent—He owes nothing to nor needs anything from anyone.

Isaiah 6 is an incredible picture of the awesomeness of our God. One morning, as I studied this passage, God spoke to my heart and showed me some things about Himself, about His throne, and about some things we will never have to worry about.

God Will Never Leave His Throne

Unlike earthly kings, who leave their thrones for love or more prosaic reasons such as political revolt, old age, or death, God will never abdicate His position on His throne. No one or no thing can ever take it from Him. He is the Lord both now and forever, and He will occupy His throne for all of eternity. We humans may choose to serve and worship other "gods," but the true and living God will remain on His throne, ruling heaven and earth.

You see, the Lord does not derive His power and authority from us. That's only true of the gods of our own hands and hearts. Do you remember the story of the prophet Elijah's contest against the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18)? Each side was to make an altar

and prepare a bull for the sacrifice—and then each would call on their respective deity. The one who answered by fire would be proven to be the true God. Being a gentleman as well as a prophet, Elijah let Baal's servants go first.

They built their altar, cut up their sacrifice, and called on their god. And called and called. All morning until noon. "O Baal, answer us!" But Baal said nothing. At the moment of their greatest need, their god was nowhere to be found.

Elijah, standing alone before these false prophets, laughed at them and at their god. The Scripture says,

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." (v. 27 NIV)

Baal's prophets grew frantic, shouted louder, and began cutting themselves until their blood streamed down. This awful spectacle went on until evening. "But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention" (v. 29 NIV).

That's what gods stamped with "Made on Earth" are capable of—nothing.

The one true Lord, however, is never away from His throne. He's never busy, asleep, or away on business. You'll never hear an angelic voicemail message saying, "I'm sorry. The Lord is out of the office until next week and can't be reached." He came through

for Elijah and His people, showing them what the real God could do.

Elijah not only built an altar and dressed the sacrifice, he soaked everything three times with water until all was drenched. Then he called on the Lord and stood back. Whoosh! Fire streaked from heaven and licked up the sacrifice, the firewood, the altar stones, the water, and even the soil underneath and around it.

The God of Elijah's day is the same God of our day! And He isn't going anywhere. Though we may turn away from Him or get sidetracked, God remains on His throne, sovereignly ruling over everything.

Do you see, we can count on Him! He's a God who makes Himself available to those who seek Him.

Our God Is Always Available to Us

If there's one thing the gods of this world (both the material gods and the religious ones) all have in common it's this: They may give the seeker a temporary sense of fulfillment or happiness, but they will always display the character of false gods—arbitrary, up-and-down, uncaring, and unloving.

A god who behaves like that is no god at all, is it?

When we place false gods on the thrones of our hearts—including the gods of material wealth, success, power, or human relationships—we set ourselves up for a fall. That's because if we don't perform to certain standards, these gods will always fail us. Everything depends on us. And worse, in the end, we will

always take on the character of the god we worship. That's a scary thought, isn't it?

Not so when we place the truly sacred, loving Creator on the throne of our hearts. Time and again God promises us, in both the Old and New Testaments, that He makes Himself available to us when we simply draw near to Him. We can rest assured that our God will never isolate Himself from us and that He'll never deny us the opportunity to approach Him.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews put it this way: "Let us draw near *with confidence* to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16, emphasis added).

When we are in a "time of need," when our worlds are shaken and things seem to be falling apart before our very eyes, we have a God who cares for us and desires that we approach Him *confidently* with hands open for His blessing. When we approach our relationship with Him as sacred, we can know beyond a doubt that He makes Himself available to us.

Knowing we can come close to almighty God that way, we can do only one thing in response: Praise His wonderful name!

Our God Is Worthy of Praise

Many of the things we put on the thrones of our hearts are, in and of themselves, good, enjoyable, and worth working for. For example, there is nothing wrong with working hard to build a successful career.

And no one can criticize us for doing the things necessary to improve our relationship with our spouse. And we're likely to receive encouragement when we try to build a strong life foundation for our children.

When put in the proper place, these things are well worth our time and effort. But are they worthy of our praise? Worthy to be worshiped and adored? Worthy to be treated as sacred? Not even close!

Only One is worthy of the kind of praise I'm talking about here. He's the One Isaiah saw for himself. The One for whom the seraphim sang out their praise.

The seraphim are extraordinary creatures, more bright and beautiful than anything we could ever imagine. The Hebrew word for *seraphim* literally means "fiery ones" or "burning ones," so we know they shine brightly. They have faces, hands, feet, voices, and, obviously, a sense of who God is. But what makes them extraordinary isn't their appearance or their voices—but their sole purpose for being.

They don't guard God's throne. That would be like giving a five-year-old boy a peashooter to protect the 82nd Airborne. They also don't minister to us, as other angelic beings do. Then what do they do? Isaiah spells out God's purpose for them: "And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory'" (Isaiah 6:3). They are dedicated solely to praising God.

This is the only biblical passage that mentions them by name, but others mention angelic beings who praise God's name. In Daniel 7:10, for example, we read of "thousands upon thousands" of spiritual

creatures whose job was to “attend Him”—in other words, to serve Him and give Him praise.

These passages bring us to this very important question: With literally thousands of heavenly creatures with nothing to do but lift up God’s name, why should it matter to Him that we mere, frail humans offer Him words and deeds of praise? What could He really want to do with any of us? Why does He give each of us this eternally profound message: “I want you to praise My Name!”?

The answer is simple, yet wonderful. You see, God doesn’t *force* us to praise Him. If He wanted to, He could compel us to speak words of praise and worship during our every waking hour. But He doesn’t do that. He created us as those who could and would worship Him out of our own free will—*because we want to*.

God wants willing, joyous praise from those whom He made capable of enjoying a loving, personal relationship with Him. God created angelic beings who sing Him wonderful heavenly praises day and night, forever and ever. But to Him, there is no sweeter praise, no more lovely song of worship, than the one sung by those He has created and redeemed.

God doesn’t *need* our praises. He doesn’t need our approval or His ego stroked. Our words of praise don’t make Him any greater or any more sure of who He is.

Why, then, does God want us to praise Him?

So He can bless us, that’s why! So He can share Himself with us. So we can have a loving, personal relationship with Him. So He can allow us a glimpse

of His awesome glory. When we open our mouths and our hearts to offer praises to our Father in heaven, we gain access to the very throne itself—and to the One who sits on that throne.

That is what the sacred looks like. That's the breathtaking picture of Himself that He wants each of us to capture.

Yes, we praise God because it brings us to a point where we can receive His blessings. But more than that, we do it because He is worthy. After all, He's God! And He's also the One who makes us worthy to speak the angels' language, His praises.

THE PROFANE MADE SACRED

When Isaiah saw this awesome vision and realized he was being drawn into the very presence of almighty God, his reaction was one of absolute awe and fear—even terror. The first words out of his mouth were, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:5). This word *woe* denotes horror, disaster, and judgment. Isaiah himself used this word at least ten times to describe God's judgment on others. So, when he said, "Woe is me!" he speaks judgment on himself.

Yet he was a righteous man of God, a prophet to God's own people. Why does he pronounce judgment on himself and tremble with such fear? He gives us the answer in his next words: "I am a man of unclean lips."

Unclean lips? On a prophet of God? How can that be?

When you think of this phrase, what comes to mind? Certainly speaking dishonestly or deceitfully. Profanity, cursing, swearing, and telling dirty stories all qualify. These things all come from “unclean lips,” but Isaiah was not talking about anything like that.

I believe that he wanted to sing the same words that the myriads of angels did. But as he stood before the throne of God, he realized he wasn't worthy.

Isaiah understood something we all need to lay hold of—that the very best we have to offer, all our talents and skills and gifts, are profane before God. Remember, Isaiah was a prophet, and the most valuable tool he had was his mouth—the mouth that spoke the prophecies of God. But he knew that his mouth was unclean, that it wasn't good enough to speak to God. Standing in this awesome scene of God's power and greatness, he realized he was a sinner, that the best part of him was profane—and it literally left him speechless.

What do you think happened next? Did God destroy him? Did He crush the prophet? Did He send him out of His presence for all of eternity? No! Instead of turning this profane man back into dust, the Lord lovingly took the initiative and made Isaiah worthy to stand in His presence and speak praises to Him.

The Bible tells us that one of the seraphim went to the altar, took a live, hot coal, then touched it to Isaiah's lips and pronounced him clean before God: “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” (v. 7).

God Himself made the provision for His servant,

removing the barrier of sin so He could draw Isaiah near.

THE SACRED MADE ACCESSIBLE

Being in the presence of almighty God is certainly an awesome and breathtaking experience—even for a man of God like Isaiah. But God shows us in this passage that His awesome presence is for our benefit and blessing. He alone provides us with the worthiness to approach Him and stand before His throne.

This soul-wrenching picture of God's glory is also a marvelous picture of His love, forgiveness, and redemption. God provided what none of us could provide for ourselves: righteousness, cleansing, and worthiness. Now we can actually approach God's throne knowing that we are loved and welcomed with open, compassionate arms.

Isaiah had a chance to see firsthand what all men and women are looking for right now: the truly sacred. He was allowed to stand in the presence of the true and living God, to communicate face-to-face with the One who made the way for him to fellowship with Him in all His glory.

Now here's the wonderful Good News: God has done the same thing for each and every one of us. We live in the age of the New Covenant, when we can approach Him and truly enjoy life in the sacred. And He's done so much more for us than send an angel—a created being—to purify our lips with a burning coal. He's sent His very own Son. Jesus Christ gave

Himself on the Cross so that not just our lips can be purified but our entire being.

This brings us to why most people's search for the sacred comes up short. When we look for the sacred in any place other than in the person of the true and living God, we are sure to find ourselves disappointed, unfulfilled, and, ultimately, lost. Every other path we may choose in our search for the sacred has us taking the initiative, has us doing the things we believe will fulfill us and give us life.

But it's different with God.

Each of us who searches for the sacred needs to know that *God has taken the initiative*. He has taken the steps to make things right between Himself and us—to cleanse us, forgive us, and save us. It is through Jesus' work on the Cross of Calvary that God sends us this blessed message: "I love you and I forgive you! Come near to Me!"

None of us needs to search for the sacred any longer, because the sacred took the initiative to come looking for us—in the person of Jesus Christ. It is through what He did on the Cross that we can have true fulfillment through a relationship with the Creator God.

Knowing this, we can rest assured that our search for the sacred ends in one place and one place only: at the foot of the Cross!

REFLECTIONS FOR
INDIVIDUAL OR SMALL GROUP STUDY

1. In what ways do you see people today searching for the sacred?
2. Why do people today possess such strong desires to explore their spirituality?
3. How have 9/11 and events since contributed to an increased interest in spiritual things?
4. In what ways has the church been successful in answering seekers' questions? Unsuccessful?
5. How did this look at Isaiah 6 help you?
6. How might these truths help a seeker?