

# Holiness P2

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## **What's the Christian Ideal? - Our Divine Nature**

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## What's the Christian Ideal? - Our Divine Nature

Jon: Hey, this is Jon at The Bible Project. This week we're going to finish our conversation on the Christian Ideal. It's a discussion about the biblical theme of holiness. If you haven't listened to the first hour of this conversation, I highly recommend that. It's the last podcast episode.

We're having this conversation on holiness because we're making a workbook that will accompany the theme video of holiness. So we had to get together and discuss what we wanted to cover how we were going to frame the contents of the workbook.

We began to wrestle with the question, "what's going to make someone want to pick up a book on holiness?" As we thought about that, we realized that holiness is really an answer to a more basic question we have as humans, which is, how do I live a full, complete joyful life where relationships are right, where I myself feel good about who I am? It's a desire we all have. It's a desire for divine life.

Tim: The Christian narrative is putting its thumb on the universal human feeling of lack, of emptiness, or of disappointment, or failure. Then in Jesus of Nazareth, who's the embodiment of the whole story, he is that fullness meeting us on our own terms and then inviting us into something more. And who doesn't want to be a part of that kind of story?

Many people don't want to be a part of an official religious institution, where a person would say, "I want to participate in the divine nature." Most people would never say that. But I'm aware that I don't love as well as I ought to. So if we want to reframe holiness, we want to say, "Let those longings and disappointments, both speak to something real."

Jon: Today on the podcast, we talk holiness - how to participate in the divine nature. We're joined by Paul Pastor, a colleague of ours, just helping us write this workbook. Thanks for listening. Here we go.

Another word people use to describe that otherness, the completeness, is the word "divine." Like, "That was such a divine moment." "That was a divine encounter." "I'm experiencing the divine."

Tim: "That meal was divine."

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Jon: It's almost like we're talking about the quest for the divine in a way. I'm almost imagining the workbook being called something like seeking the divine or the life of the Divine or something. But what does it mean practically to be looking for a life that is more full and more abundant than you normally experience it? Why do we have that and what does the Bible have to say about living that kind of life, seeking that kind of life?

That now grabs me, and I'm like, "Yeah, I want to know about that." Then all sudden, now I'm talking about these things like "God's holiness" and "purity laws." All of a sudden we talk about, actually, that's a dangerous quest. Think of why we live in an imperfect state. It's going to be a perilous kind of task at times.

Now all those things have a lot more bearing for me and are more interesting than just going into and talking abstractly about perfection and God's holiness.

Tim: But it raises the question, what does it mean for a human to become divine? Some people get nervous with that kind of question. As far as my life experience, I don't realize any kind of divine ideal on a regular basis. But I have moments where I experience something very powerful and transcendent, I wish they were more often. And it seems to me, that's what the whole biblical tradition is calling humans into is, there is something more.

Jon: There's those are moments where you realize you've been working really hard at a relationship or something, and you're seeing the fruit of that. Or you've been working really hard on a project to help you and help other people and you see the fruit of that.

And there's a sense of when it all starts working and evil isn't corrupting it, it's just moving, you're like, "Whoa, this feels right." And it is rare because there is a lot of corruption and we never fully can realize these things even in our best intentions. But that is something we long for.

I don't think anyone would be like, "Yeah, no, I don't really want that." I think people would say, "I don't know how to attain that. I don't think I ever would be able to." But no one would say, "Count me out of that. Deal me out."

Paul: It strikes me that some of the most direct advice as to how to live that ideal comes from the Apostle Paul in his writings. He always points back to the

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person of Jesus and the idea that if we are in Jesus, the Holy One, we somehow take his life into ourselves and can begin manifesting that and living that in our individual lives, not just in relationship to a good life or what we might say is a wholly or a morally pure life, but actually to the point where we get to inherit everything that he gets to inherit.

It's this very abundant language where because he took on our poverty, we get his richness because he took on our death, we get his life. He says again and again "have the same mind in yourself that was in Jesus, walk like Jesus, grow up to statue of Jesus."

Jon: That's where this gets really mystical is that, can you connect to the same power that Jesus is connected to? Can the Spirit of Jesus live inside of you? Can you keep in step with it? It's not like a five-step program.

Tim: No. In the video, we actually just use one obscure Old Testament illusion in the Gospel of John to do that where we connected Ezekiel's river, he has a vision of God's holy presence emanating out of the temple to make the universe new by a river. What he sees is this image of a river flowing out of Jerusalem, going to the most desolate place on the planet, the Dead Sea Valley and making it new.

Then in the Gospel of John chapter 7, I think it is - that might be chapter 4 - he has this phrase where he talks about "for those who believe in me, streams of water will flow out of their bellies flowing up to eternal life."

He's picking up vocabulary from that vision, but what he's saying is, Jesus talked about himself as the temple. Then he says, "Those who come to me participate in this divine vitalizing life that flows out of God and that goes out into creation and people can participate in that." In the video on holiness, that's all we did with it. Then we were like, "And then Jesus followers are to be part of the stream."

This brings us in then to the broader narrative, and holiness just becomes one theme.

Jon: Right. This is connected to then living in the spirit.

Tim: Yeah, and all sorts of other things, too. But it's the Holy Spirit.

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Jon: Yeah, the Holy Spirit. So it is very connected.

Tim: And it's this Holy Spirit that makes people holy. By that, they're set apart, but they're set apart because they're becoming more like the Holy God. They're participating more in the divine life.

Paul: Two words that we used earlier we're "mimic" and "participate" in regards to how we relate to God's holiness. That strikes me. Those are really interesting that we mimic who God is and that we participate somehow in the space and the life that he's created to be a canvas for his abundance.

Tim: In the second letter of Peter, he uses a phrase that Protestants haven't quite known what to do with, but the Eastern Orthodox traditions have really jumped on this. But he says in 2 Peter Chapter 1, "Grace and peace to you. God's divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness by truly knowing him who called us by his glory and excellence. For by these traits, his glory, and excellence, he's granted to us is precious and magnificent promises so that by them, y'all may become participants in God's divine nature, escaping the corruption that's in the world by last.

Then he goes on to give this ethical exultation towards moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness. I don't think the word holiness appeared, but he's talking about it.

Paul: But it's a nature thing. He call this theosis don't they?

Tim: That's right. There's a divine set of character traits that set God apart as holy. The whole biblical story is God getting people to share more in that divine life.

Paul: I can get behind that.

Jon: He calls it glory and goodness.

Tim: That's right. Glory and goodness.

Jon: Which are different ways to approach that same...

[crosstalk 00:10:27]

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Tim: Once again, return to that thing. Holiness is just describing the difference between me and I being—

Jon: It's experience of interacting with glory and goodness.

Tim: Yes. The glory and goodness and beauty and power are the things that are the ideal.

Paul: That's really interesting then because Peter here and then Paul as well, they often do follow up these huge theological expositions, obviously with these opportunities to exhort and tell us how to live and maybe a way of thinking about it is to think of those exultations as protocol - as the new protocol for approaching the holiness found in Jesus. But now the holiness it's found in ourselves as well through the Holy Spirit.

Tim: It's protocol when you come into contact with being who is life and love.

Paul: And anything having to do with life or death, I wonder if the same logic of the ritual purity laws would apply.

Jon: There's also some purity language in this if you continue on to verse 9. It says, "Whoever does not have the character qualities is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed."

[00:12:16]

Tim: So what are we saying?

Paul: This guide us back to the ideal in some little way, right? This points us—

Jon: Peter here is talking about the desire for the ideal, the quest for the ideal.

Tim: Which he calls the divine nature.

Jon: And he says that there is a divine power that we have in order to participate in it, to have a godly life - that's another way to talk about it - and it comes through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and goodness. Is he talking about Jesus there or is he talking about God?

Paul: Who is the calling one?

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Tim: I think God. The Father is the calling one. I'm just noticing the phrase "sharers or participants of the divine nature." The word "share" is the word "koinonia" which is a common Greek New Testament word for "participation" or "sharing."

Actually, in the earlier conversation that we weren't recording, we were talking about having a movement of the book on holiness be about participating in the "divine life." And that's exactly the phrase that he uses right here.

Jon: He says, "So that through them, referring to the promises, you may koinonia in the divine nature?"

Tim: You may become koinonus, a participator in God's divine nature.

Jon: That seems to me the anchor of all this is participating in the divine nature. That when the rubber hits the road, that's why all these matters. And holiness is a good way to begin to unpack how the Bible thinks about that idea.

Tim: Correct, yeah. Because in a sense, humans are already called an "image of the Divine." They are images of the divine, I guess, who are capable of being even more closely connected to divine.

Paul: Through Jesus who is the icon, right?

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Paul: The Greek word is "the icon." And so in the icon who is himself not just an image, but also the reality behind the image. Because he says, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father and were brought into him." There is this sense of really intimate, mystical, strange union that is at the heart of the gospel.

Tim: I think I'm not super well read on the history of the Christian missionary effort. But Christianity has been compelling to hundreds of millions of people more. What what's up with that? There's something really powerful about a felt need of the human condition that I ought to be but in reality, I'm this.

The Christian narrative, this is putting its thumb on a really universal human feeling of lack of emptiness or of disappointment or failure. Then in Jesus of Nazareth, who's the embodiment of the whole story, he's that fullness meeting us on our own terms and then inviting us into something more. And

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who doesn't want to be a part of that kind of story? Many people don't want to be a part of an official religious institution that's trying to—

Jon: Or moralism?

Tim: Or moralism or something. Many people find fullness and lots of different kinds of things, but that is the essence of the story. Whether a person would say, "I want to participate in the divine nature," most people would never say that. They wouldn't use that language. But I'm aware that I'm I don't love as well as I ought to and I'm very aware that I'm mortal. It's becoming more clear to me every day.

Paul: "I want abundance." We all say that.

Tim: Yeah. If we want to reframe holiness for people, we want to say that those longings and disappointments are real and that they...This is a CS Lewis theme, I guess then. It's either we're just projecting our desires and hopes onto the universe and we're just making this up, or those speak to something real that we actually live in a world where it's possible, or that those needs and desires speak to something that can meet them.

Jon: It's a pretty radical claim to say that interacting with that kind of life is possible, not just some fantasy that you can live a life that is much bigger than common life - this divine life.

Here's another thing I'm thinking about. If this is just about holiness, there's some clarity for me about the word "holiness" which is it's really just that moment I love you talking about being at the shore. This moment of coming in touch with something transcendent and realizing how other that thing is and how small you are, and realizing how grand and awesome it is, but also how dangerous it is.

It's those mix of emotions that's is very nuanced, beautiful moment that is the word "holiness." We describe that as encountering something holy. Now if that's all we're trying to do is tell people that's what holiness is. We can just write that chapter, and then we can be like, "That's holiness."

Then we can maybe throw some stuff in about how does purity laws fit into that and how does Jesus talk about it and change. We can talk about the narrative. But if we do want to wrap this, the other opportunities to wrap this



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in a bigger conversation of, why is that such a special moment and is there any hope for going through the veil and connecting to that holy thing in a way that won't destroy you but will make you complete?" That's the bigger narrative that I'm wondering, "Do we want to tackle that in this book?"

Paul: Interesting to think through the book of Hebrews in relation to that. The way that Jesus unites God's nature with the protocol of approaching him, he is our great high priest who has really united in himself, fit demand and the satisfaction of the demand.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. The Letter to the Hebrews picks up the priestly traditions of the Old Testament that point out this gap and then says that the incarnate Son of God is the fulfillment, the embodiment of that overabundance to us in human form.

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Jon: But just from this conversation, the word "holy" for me has gone from being a word that's difficult and loaded and feels even a little trite to feeling more inspiring and almost wishing that we did have it in a normal language. It's this moment of transcendence, this moment of "I've encountered something really special and bigger and more complete and I got to come in contact with it if only by vicinity." I've only got to sort of see it but I want more of it.

If you ever met a celebrity, there's a sense of like, 'Whoa. I'm right next to you.' And for whatever reason, they just feel bigger than life, more important. It's this exhilarating feeling.

Tim: Usually that's because we ascribe to them some kind of more full existence.

Jon: They are heroes.

Tim: They must be a human who's a better human.

Jon: More human.

Paul: Superhuman.

Tim: We actually have some friends of ours, their neighbors and friends, they met the pope recently. It was a husband and wife. The wife, she was describing what it was like to meet the pope.

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- Jon: What kind of words do you use in this situation like this?
- Tim: Compelling fascination or whatever. She said it was like one of those moments where you're not in control of yourself. She ended up looking away for a moment and then she turned back and he was standing in front of her. Then her cell phone was in her hand to take a picture and she grabbed the Pope's hand and put the cell phone in his hands.
- Jon: She just didn't know why.
- Tim: Then all sudden, she's putting her cell phone in the Pope's hand smiling and not knowing what to say. And someone took a picture of that moment for her. She was showing me this picture of her looking into the eyes of the pope.
- Jon: She lost her faculties.
- Tim: Yeah, totally.
- Paul: She was bewitched.
- Tim: That's a good example. These are almost always people that we don't know. Therefore, we—
- Jon: You ascribe some mystery to them.
- Tim: Some superhuman quality to them. Then when we encounter them, we feel like we're in the presence of something of the holy. Isn't that interesting?
- Jon: It is interesting.
- Paul: Coming back for a moment to reframing the word, what do you guys think about how to handle myths of holiness? What do you think about having synonyms? Almost like a little fake thesaurus and a real thesaurus of how the Bible uses holy? These are words that you might replace holy within your life: arrogant, moralistic, naysaying.
- You think of Church Lady from SNL; stuffy, boring. But in the Bible's imagination, holiness is actually the opposite of all those things.

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Jon: Part of this workbook will be making that shift where when you hear that word you get excited instead of deflated. After this conversation, the word now has this...he used the word "sparkle" before. But it has this quality too, which is kind of like it has some more pop and excitement and vitality, where before it just felt a little dead.

Tim: If you could interview Moses after the burning bush, what words would you use to describe what he encountered?

Paul: Sparkly. Super sparkly.

Tim: Or Isaiah? Yeah, exactly.

Jon: I don't know if we have to start by trying to describe the sense of our desire for the divine but I still think it might be a good place to start. The idea is again just to flush it out. Start with "we all desire this divine life." We could start there and then go what is that this abundant, complete, full.

Then take a step back and say, "In the next chapter, why does that even exist or does it exist and who authored it, and what does it say about the author if someone put that together, this ideal? Then that's then talking about God as being holy.

Then by the fact that he is the author of it, he is holy as an attribute because he's the only one who's created something so awesome. So not only are you in the vicinity of the ocean being stoked out of your mind, you can be in the vicinity of the God who invented the ocean, which is even more transcendent and divine.

Tim: I think the biblical authors, especially here, the poets of the Psalms, I'm thinking of Psalm 19 where you look at the sky and it's a statement or a testimony to God's Glory, and then it just describes the arc of a son. Just a day's rotation of the earth and all this metaphor. I'm pretty certain the word "holiness" doesn't appear anywhere in that poem.

The encounter that I'm having with the ocean on that day is the encounter the poet's inviting you to have looking at the sun crossing the sky. In both of those cases, you're being invited to see a person behind these realities.

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What I'm actually encountering when I'm overwhelmed, compellingly fascinated by the pounding surf is the author of the surf. That's how the biblical authors want me to think so that I am encountering a person when I'm encountering the power of the...The modern Westerners have so many hang-ups viewing the world that way but—

Jon: Becomes too - what's the pantheistic maybe? It feels smacks of that? Is that right?

Tim: I guess there's that. There's I guess more eastern worldviews that the ocean is an embodiment of the divine. I'm more thinking about the modern western kind of enlightenment child.

Paul: Nothing but H2O molecules spilling together.

[crosstalk 00:27:27]

Tim: Or living a disenchanted world, it's just molecules crashing into each other.

Paul: Plato's in there too whenever we talk about this idea of the ideal.

Jon: Oh, yeah. It becomes this very platonic calculus.

Tim: Which may not help us, you're saying?

Paul: No, it doesn't help us because it's almost too close to the biblical imagination in this sense. I don't want to rabbit trail us, but Plato's whole idea is that everything we see is a faulty reflection of something that is essential, that isn't beyond this reality. But the biblical imagination says, "No, this is a corrupted version, but it's not a faulty reflection and actually the capacity for goodness is woven in everything that we see, not only as a reflection but in it's real essential created form."

Tim: You're saying that's a liability using the word "ideal."

Jon: I think we can move away from the word "ideal," and talk more about divine, or fullness, completeness.

Tim: Divine as an adjective?

Jon: Maybe "divine," and we unpack it. Full, complete, abundant.

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- Tim: Yeah. I'm trying to think. There is divine as an adjective to talk about how awesome something is. A meal.
- Jon: Yeah, but are we looking for a noun?
- Tim: Oh, I see.
- Jon: What is it in 2 Peter?
- Tim: Divine. It's the word "deity," but then as an adjective, "divine."
- Jon: But if we're looking for a noun, what would the noun be?
- Paul: Is it too vague to say "God's life"? Like "his kind of life," "his method of existence," "his mode of being"?
- Jon: There's got to be a biblical author that chose a noun at one point to describe this.
- Tim: Yeah. I'm trying to think.
- Paul: Just covered kavod, glory?
- Tim: Oh, yeah. We talked about this last time. I think glory would be the noun.
- Jon: Glory is the noun?
- Tim: Yeah.
- Jon: That's another word you have to unpack though. Let's find a word we don't have to.
- Tim: I know.
- Jon: Well, we don't find it now, but cool. I think this helps a lot.
- Paul: Does it help you?
- Jon: It does. It helps me very much. This will be a really, really exciting workbook if we can bring people from the stodgy feeling of holiness to this very enchanted and compelling fascination of this life. Man, is there something there? This is a whole nother conversation.

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Paul: Bring it.

Jon: Well, this whole idea of being under a spell, fascinated, and this idea of being connected to God's Spirit and having the mind of Christ, I've been always just trying to think like, practically does that mean I get to turn off..

You know when you're in some sort of flow state, and it's like you're just firing on all cylinders and you're not really being consciously aware of all the decisions you're making, you're just making them intuitively and effectively, I wonder if that's it...It's almost a sense of you're under spell, right? You're connected to this kind of like energy - some people call it the muse - and you lose yourself.

There's something very similar to that. It seems to be walking in the Spirit, having the mind of Christ, these kinds of things, which is living life in such a way where you lose your sense of self, you aren't so consciously trying to control everything and you're living out of this other power, and in a way you could say you're fascinated, you're enchanted, or you're spellbound in a way.

Paul: Paul talks about this when he talks about basically living out the life of Christ in such a way that he feels like he's actually dead and that Jesus' life has come to life inside him so that it's the Messiah working out the works of the Messiah through Paul.

Tim: Not me living.

Paul: Yes, not me living but Christ living in me.

Tim: Or you'll say, "I worked harder than any of the other apostles at planting churches." And they'll say, "But it was God's grace. His overabundant that was working through me.

[crosstalk 00:32:11]

Paul: And maybe we're back to Jesus talking about how the living water will flow out of us, this idea of total abundance and giving where it's not sourced in us, but it is flowing through us.

Tim: But it's not us.

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Jon: Well, that's the sense you get when you were driving on autopilot, right? You drove and all of a sudden you're there and you're like, "I didn't just do that." But you did it. Or if you're doing some creative writing or drawing and you just get into that flow state and all sudden there's 500 words on the page and you're like, "Whoa, did I write that?"

Paul: Sure.

Jon: I think it's that kind of thing.

Tim: This is Holy Spirit territory in terms of theme video, but also...I was reading and reflecting on David's final poem in the book of Samuel, 2 Samuel 23 and he opens it as a prophetic utterance. "The utterance of the son of Jesse raised up on high. The utterance of the sweet one of the songs of Israel. Then he says, 'God spoke by me, his word was on my tongue.'"

Then he goes on to give this little parable about how a righteous king is like the sun shining on a cloudless morning reflecting off the dew of the grass and making the grass grow. And then how, when a bad king rains, he's like thorns that grow up and dry out and then you have to cut them down and burn them in the fire. Those are the last words of David in that poem.

One, it's one of the few statements in the Old Testament explicitly about the nature of inspiration. David wrote a poem. He woke up and wrote a little parable one day about a righteous king and a bad game. And it turns out that he ended up being both. You read this at the end of Samuel, like, "Oh, yeah, David, you actually were in both of these modes."

The statement about inspiration was the word..no. "God spoke by means of me His Word on my tongue." He was clearly in full possession of his faculties. He wrote the poem. No one else wrote it, he wrote it.

Paul: But he recognized there's something different about this.

Tim: Yes, that's right. There's a moment - and the biblical story is full of this. I mean, I think the story is trying to tell us this ought to be our normal way of living in the world is so in touch with the divine life that you could say we are just expressions of God's character in the world. And then all the ethical expectations of the Bible are to be in that mode.

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Jon: It's describing that mode.

Tim: But for me what's fascinating is, especially in modern Western Protestantism Churchianity, whatever, we have so divided those two, that if God's really at work, it must not be me. Or if it's me, then it's not God.

Then we bring that to the Bible. Then all of a sudden, if the Bible is a divine word, it has to be a magical book that fell out of heaven. It can't really have too many human fingerprints on it, or else we start to get hot and sweaty and nervous once the human agency of the biblical authors is really highlighted.

But it comes into all these other ways too, where it's an idea that says, "I become myself most fully when I'm most full of the divine life." I'm not less myself. I'm more of myself than ever when I'm in touch with the divine life.

Jon: While you are also dead to yourself?

Tim: Totally. When I want to highlight how it's different than my whatever, more selfish motive existing, I'll say, "It's not me; it's the Messiah living in me. But then when I want to talk about it in terms of the image of God narrative and becoming what God made me to be, then it's me - The Word of the Lord is on my tongue. It's my tongue and it's God Word on my tongue." Anyway.

Jon: All right, that's a good place to end.

Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project. This workbook will be done sometime early next year. If you want to know when it's done, make sure to sign up for email updates from our website and you'll get to know everything that's going at the Bible Project. You can sign up for that at [thebibleproject.com](http://thebibleproject.com). We've got lots of other free resources available. They're on our YouTube channel and our website. Also, we have a new podcast. Tim has a couple decades' worth of teachings that we are reediting and putting them up on a podcast called Exploring my Strange Bible. Make sure you've checked that out as well. Thanks for being a part of this with us.