

Finding God in the Ordinary

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Pierce Taylor Hibbs

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FINDING GOD IN THE ORDINARY

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Wipf & Stock
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-5326-5768-9

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-5326-5769-6

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-5770-2

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For my wife, who walks with me through the ordinary

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Introduction

OVER THE YEARS, I have been blessed to receive a biblically sound theological education.¹ I have learned much about God and his world in light of the truth of Scripture. Yet, I have also noticed that even those of us who have special training in theology are susceptible to a sort of numbness or a lack of awe and worship in our daily lives. In fact, perhaps this is an even greater threat for those who study theology than it is for those who work in other professions. And this is no small thing: how can we possibly lose a sense of awe and wonder when we claim to have a personal relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

I believe that, like it or not, all of us are negatively affected by the sinful world in which we live. We strive not to be, and we prayerfully ask God's help in enabling us to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. Still, our hearts and minds can easily become infected by unbiblical thinking when we are not being vigilant, that is, when we are not earnestly engaging with God and his word every day.

Now, what exactly does this sort of negative worldly effect look like? I believe that it takes the form of “neutrality” or “impersonal objectivity.” Let me explain what I mean.

1. I completed an MAR degree at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2010, and finished my ThM degree at the same institution in 2016. I cannot say enough to commend this school for its biblical integrity and its commitment to Reformed theology.

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For people who do not believe that a tripersonal God has spoken the world into being and maintains all things by the word of his power (Gen 1:1; Heb 1:3; John 1:1; Col 1:17), the world can seem like a conglomeration of elements: a tree here, a building there—a daisy, a duck, a daydream. All of these things are basically phenomena detached from any meaningful plan of a God who knows you and me on an intimate level. Apart from the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Christ by faith and reconciles us to our heavenly Father, the world looks as if it is *just there*. It looks cold and impersonal and void of any unified purpose.

This is perhaps one of the greatest falsehoods that the devil uses to keep people spiritually crippled. And this falsehood has been given fodder by the empirical and rationalistic tendencies in modern life and thought.² “The world,” says Satan, “is *just there*. It’s just a cold and neutral atmosphere in which you eek out your miserable, doubt-laden life. There is no God here.” As Christians, we know this is a bold-faced lie. God himself has told us, in his word, that he is both transcendent and immanent.³ He is both Lord over all things and yet intimately close to all of us. In fact, the tripersonal God is even *in* those who believe in the name of Christ (John 14:23; Rom. 8:9). He is *that* close.

According to Scripture, the world is not cold and impersonal. In fact, it has been marked by its maker, a warm and personal God. In Romans 1, Paul speaks of the ungodly and unrighteous and says that “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, *in the things that have been made*” (Rom. 1:19–20; emphasis added). The world in which we live reveals God. Notice that Paul is simple here. His expression covers all of creation: “the things that have been made,” that is, *everything*.

2. For a helpful Christian approach to the way in which empiricism and rationalism are examples of rebellion against the God who is fully present with us, see Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*.

3. On God’s transcendence and immanence, see Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 13–18; *The Doctrine of God*, 103–15.

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It is not the case that some of the world reveals God, or even that most of it does; *all* of creation is marked by the triune God who spoke it into being and maintains it by the word of his power.

This means, among other things, that the world is *revelational* of God. It reveals him, and in that sense “speaks” of him. This does not mean that the world is animated or that pantheism is biblically warranted. It simply means that the world is not mute and cold. It testifies to the Lord who made it and sustains it. Psalm 19:1–4 is unabashed about this.

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.

⁴ Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

There is a profound sense in which all of the world “speaks” of God, in that it reveals something about him. John Calvin is one of my major influences on this point, though he was merely voicing the truth of Scripture:

Whichever way we turn our eyes, there is no part of the world, however small, in which at least some spark of God’s glory does not shine. In particular, we cannot gaze upon this beautiful masterpiece of the world, in all its length and breadth, without being completely dazzled, as it were, by an endless flood of light. Accordingly, in Hebrews, the apostle aptly calls the world the mirror of things invisible, because the structure of the world serves as a mirror in which we behold God, who otherwise cannot be seen (Heb 11:3).⁴

An endless flood of light—that is our world. We are literally surrounded by an environment steeped in God’s presence, a world

4. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 10.

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that cannot help but reveal something of the God who spoke it into being. Sin is the reason why we are blinded to this profound truth.

That is why we must constantly rid ourselves of the falsehood that the world is somehow neutral and cold: a conglomeration of elements, unpossessed by God and void of divinely-ordained meaning. Our sinful world says, “The earth is man’s; we govern ourselves.” But God says, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps 24:1). We are living on and within purchased property—an entire cosmos that is possessed and governed by the triune God. And the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have so created this cosmos that it reveals God’s control, authority, and presence around every corner.⁵

This book is my attempt to describe “commonplace” elements or events of my own life and reflect on how they reveal the God I worship and serve. My hope is that this book encourages you to look for God in the world around you—in the ordinary. He is here. And because he is here, the world is not truly ordinary. It is always *extraordinary* because all around us we find marks of the Trinity: the God who governs, guides, and protects his people in a world that everywhere reveals his presence with us. Let us together train our minds and hearts to combat the sinful assumptions of the world and find the God of grace in the strangest places. This will take daily work on our part, driven and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But we have already been promised by Christ himself that *this* Spirit, living in us, will guide us into all truth (John 16:13).

5. The triad of God’s control, authority, and presence is one of the many contributions that John Frame has made to Reformed theology. It can be seen throughout his works, but a concise introduction can be found in his *Systematic Theology*, 21–31.

The Solar System in My Coffee Cup

ROUTINE HAS A WAY of anesthetizing us to daily detail. We often need something to snap the smelling salts and bring us back to marvel at the world in which we live. One of the ways I bring myself to contemplate the particularities around me is by listening to instrumental piano music. Some people far more educated and experienced in music than I am might call it “new age” or something like that. But all I know is that it makes me think, and that’s what I want early in the day.

As the sun was rising one early September morning, the piano notes began to fill the air. I sat at my desk with a cup of black coffee and was just about to start checking email when I glanced at the surface of the coffee in my mug. There were swirls of tiny particles from the coffee grounds churning in circles that intermingled, broke from each other, then interlocked again. I was mesmerized. As the piano music drifted through the room, life seemed to slow to a halt. More and more, the swirling particles looked like galaxies, slow-dancing around some gravitational point, bending and turning, colliding and reshaping.

The blackness of the coffee, contrasting with my white mug, served as a silent and still backdrop for smaller movements, which I had thought were *ordinary*, even irrelevant. But these were not ordinary. Nothing is ordinary or irrelevant in a world that has been birthed into being by the speech of the Trinity, a world which holds together because of that selfsame speech (John 1:1; Heb 1:3).

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As I reflected on the swirls in my coffee cup, I thought not about where the coffee had come from or how it tasted. I thought about our solar system. We get so caught up in ourselves that we forget our own smallness. Self-centeredness, you know, is a magnifying behavior. As we think more and more about ourselves, we appear to be more focal, as the rest of the world fades into a fuzzy background. But that is just an appearance. The truth of the matter is that we are tiny—little conscious creatures ambling about in God’s greatness. It is in *him* that “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But this “him” is vast. We carry on in a cosmos too immense to imagine. As I am drinking my tiny cup of coffee, sitting in my tiny chair, in my tiny office, in a tiny building, there are stars burning, planets rotating on axis, comets soaring through blackness, moons encircling planets. Here I sit with my coffee cup, my microcosm of the cosmos.

I say that I am small, but that does not cover the half of my wonder. What really sets my head spinning is the fact that in this vastness, in this universe too extensive to traverse, too deep to fathom, there is a God who knows my *name* . . . *my* name: Pierce Taylor Hibbs. No matter how old I get, I will always be asking a very simple question: Why? Why does God, who spoke the world into motion and governs every quark and cotton blossom with his speech, why does he know my name? Why does he *want* to know my name? I do not understand. I know all of the theological answers to that question, conceptually. We are made in God’s image, bound in covenant with him, made to worship him in the fullness of our personality—but put all of that on hold for just a moment. Think with me about king David’s ancient psalm.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him? (Ps 8:3–4)

David likely knew the book of Genesis much better than many of us today. He knew that we are precious to God because we have been made in God’s image (Gen 1:26–27), but that did not stop

THE SOLAR SYSTEM IN MY COFFEE CUP

him from marveling. How could it be that the God of heaven and earth, who as I write is helping a hornet tread across a telephone wire outside my window, the Lord of time and space, would want to know *me*? Why would God be *mindful* of me?

The answer to that question is very simple—so simple, in fact, that we neglect it even when we try to think about God. It is an answer both profoundly simple and infinitely mysterious: love. You see, love is not just what God does or how he acts; *love is who God is* (1 John 4:8). *God is love*. This is perhaps a bit easier to approach when we remember that God is the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Dumitru Stăniloae, a Romanian theologian in the Orthodox tradition, wrote a book entitled *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*.¹ In the beginning, before time and space were spoken into being, before the stars were burning, before the earth was turning, there was *love*. “God is love,” he writes, “and therefore life and light in themselves, because he is the supreme unity of three individual persons in communion with one another.”²

Abraham Kuyper, in the Dutch Reformed tradition, also wrote movingly of the Trinity as the hearth of love.

God’s children have derived from the Word deeper and richer conceptions of divine Love, for they confess a Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, one God in three Persons: the Father, who generates; the Son, who is generated; and the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from both Father and Son. And the Love-life whereby these Three mutually love each other is the Eternal Being Himself. This alone is the true and real life of Love. The entire Scripture teaches that nothing is more precious and glorious than the Love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father, and of the Holy Spirit for both.

This Love is nameless: human tongue has no words to express it; no creature may *inquisitively* look into its eternal depths. It is the great and impenetrable mystery.

1. Stăniloae, *The Holy Trinity: In the Beginning There Was Love*.

2. Stăniloae, 14. I would say “self-conscious” rather than “individual,” since the latter could imply that there are three independent beings in God.

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We listen to its music and adore it, but when its glory has passed through the soul, the lips are still unable adequately to describe any of its features. God may loose the tongue so that it can shout and sing to the praise of eternal love, but the intellect remains powerless.

Love is not God, but God is love; and He is sufficient to Himself to love absolutely and forever. He has no need of the creature, and the exercise of His Love did not begin with the creature whom He could love, but it flows and springs eternally in the Love-life of the Triune God. God is Love; its perfection, divine beauty, real dimensions, and holiness are not found in men, not even in the best of God's children, but scintillate only around the Throne of God.³

God *is* love. And it was this loving, trinitarian God who spoke us into motion and gave us each *a name*.

We are so used to the practice of earthly parents naming their children that we forget this practice has divine roots. God himself, as the Father of Adam, gave the first human his name (Gen 2:20), a name derived from the substance that God had used to form him: dust (Gen 2:7; cf. 3:19; 5:2). God's naming of Adam set the precedent (the image-bearing ability) for Adam to name his wife and children (Gen 3:20, 4:25–26).⁴ The name of a person, especially in the biblical tradition, was more than a sound, a sequence of letters. A name was an *identity*, a revelation of sorts. A name, in Herman Bavinck's words, "is a sign of the person bearing it, a designation referring to some characteristic in which a person reveals himself or herself and becomes knowable. There is a connection between a name and its bearer, and that connection, so far from being arbitrary, is rooted in that bearer."⁵ Names express something of their bearers.

What's more, name-giving is an exercise in authority. God had named the parts of creation and thereby exercised his authority

3. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henry De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1995), 542–43.

4. See also Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 29–30.

5. Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 97.

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and sovereign control. As a derivative example of authority, Adam, as God's image-bearer, was meant to name the creatures God had created. Adam's naming was meant to submit to the Lordship of his maker; it was a "naming that drew the world toward the destiny planned by God from the beginning."⁶

Now, take these twin truths—that names express something of their bearers and that naming is an exercise in authority—and think of your own name. Your name has a revelatory character: by it, you are marked and become *known* to others. But you did not (likely) name yourself. Your parents named you, exercising their God-given parental authority. But that authority, like Adam's name-giving authority, was granted by and is subservient to God's own authority. Ultimately, God is the one who controlled what your name would be. God, in a sense, has named you. He has given you a name, through creating and controlling the circumstances and persons that lead to your birth. Why would God do this?

We go again to the profoundly simple and infinitely mysterious answer: love. In naming Adam (and the rest of us), God exercises his Lordship over us. He claims us as his own, and he does so in *love*. Our names reflect not merely our own identity among human persons but our great meaning and worth among the divine persons of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are responsible for your name and mine. And because God *is* love, that responsibility has emerged *from* love. You and I have a name because God is love.

The tripersonal God who is love knows us each by name. Indeed, he has given us our names! And this means that the divine Love-life of the Trinity has spilled over the edges of eternity's cup and covered us. We are saturated with the holy, creative, and redeeming love of God. We may not always feel saturated. In fact, oftentimes we feel dried to the bone, directionless, lifeless even. But the truth of what God has done and is doing in us and through us is not judged by our feelings. It is judged by his word.

Let us return to David's psalm. His burning question was, "What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man

6. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 37.

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that you care for him?” David, my brother, though it may not seem like much of an answer, God is mindful of us because of his great and mysterious love, a Spirit-forged love in Christ from which we cannot be sundered. With a heart of faith, I say with Paul, “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39).

This is the great truth that outshines all others. As I stare at the swirling coffee grounds in my mug and think of the vastness of our world, I know that I am very small and yet greatly loved. Perhaps most of the Christian life is about our coming to accept this basic fact. In the greatness of God, the smallest of things is given tremendous weight.