Chapter 3

Treasure Seekers

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.[1]

—William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury

I do not know an awful lot of English men named Terry, particularly not the sort who spent considerable quantities of their free time standing in fields waving metal detectors at the earth, but since reading about Terry Herbert I think I would like to get to know a few more of them. In July of 2009 this amateur treasure hunter unearthed more than 1,600 Anglo-Saxon objects of gold and silver from around A.D. 650. He found fittings from the hilts of swords, parts of a helmet and three crosses, and it was the largest Anglo-Saxon treasure hoard ever found. The value? A staggering $5.3million, which was split equally between the farmer who owns the field and our man Terry.[2]

Here's what he said about the hunt:

> I'd been on the field before with another metal detector and hardly found anything. It had thrown up old furniture fittings, bits of clocks, pieces of brass and I just thought: "Oh, it's another useless field." But I decided to carry on anyway and switch machines to the one I call my "old faithful." His tenacity paid off. Within 15 minutes, just before noon, Terry's machine began to indicate that it had found something.[3]

Terry, a retired wood machinist who worked in a coffin factory, was suddenly rich. A simple walk through a farmer's field had changed everything, blowing away his assumptions and expectations in a single moment. Any of his previous finds were instantly put into context.

You can probably tell where we are going with this. For all Terry's immense increase in wealth, his treasure is a pittance compared with the value of meeting Jesus. Jesus is the treasure of the ages, the pearl of great price and when we stumble upon the treasure of knowing him, everything changes.

Worship and Revelation

"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead … " (Rev 1:17). This was John's reaction to seeing the glorious vision of the Lord whose " … face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Rev 1:16). He (almost) spontaneously ceased to exist. This from the man who had already spent around three years with Jesus in Galilee, walking, talking and generally being with him. But when he saw the risen, glorious, Lord, he was dumbfounded by this staggering sight.

At this point you may be thinking "yeah, that's what happened to people in Bible times. They get all 'in the spirit' and strange things happen." I want to dare you to believe that Jesus might want to reveal himself to you as the glorious, risen Lord today. Why not? After all, the New Testament presents these kinds of experiences as part of normal Christianity.

The book of Revelation gives us an outstanding picture of a people who had discovered the incomparable treasure of Jesus. It is a dramatic episode of revelation and worship and sits as the climax of the 66 books of the Bible written by 40 authors over 1500 years. In this apocalyptic finale we see a window into heaven that foretells the conclusion of history, showing how our story intersects with God's eternal purposes.

The Revelation gives us a snapshot of the zealous worship of a burgeoning movement of Christians amidst a culture awash in idol worship—an ancient culture that in many ways bears a striking resemblance to modern times. Rome was a study in contrast; a mix of tens of millions of slaves who had been captured in Rome's military victories juxtaposed against an excessively rich ruling class. Christians were tempted to go with the flow of an idol worshiping culture.

For a first-world Christian like me, it's hard to imagine life in an emperor-worshipping culture, but it's not hard to relate to the Laodiceans who John addresses in chapter three. John writes to these believers, "You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17, NLT).

The Laodiceans had once been on-fire Christians but had become self-satisfied consumerists. They had lost sight of Jesus, their true treasure. Their love for him had grown cold and their faith had grown lukewarm. Just as it is for us today, their challenge was to stay focused on Jesus as their Treasure, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:21).

For me, the only way to make Jesus the center is to follow a discipline of being a "treasure seeker." In my daily routine of reading and prayer, I look through a window to heaven. Even if the window is only open a crack, it makes all the difference. Other-worldly beauty rattles me out of my complacency and indifference. It keeps me from settling for a materialistic view of reality. Don Williams says of Revelation that it "is out to subvert the way early Christians view reality. It is a frontal assault on the gods and goddesses of the Roman empire."[4] For us, Revelation serves a similar purpose, assaulting the gods and goddesses of the twenty-first century.

Jesus or Caesar

I can't imagine living in a country that required me to worship the president, but that's what the early Roman Christians faced. They lived in a time when emperor worship was

mandated by the government. Domitian, a totalitarian ruler who brutally persecuted the Christian church, is said to have built numerous statues of himself and demanded that he be addressed as "our Lord and God" (dominus et deus). Not to acknowledge the Caesar as divine was considered treasonous. Yet because this group of Christians had seen how *worthy* of worship Jesus was, they openly proclaimed his divinity and the Book of Revelation is a picture of two kingdoms in conflict.

For early Roman Christians, loyalty to Jesus was very dangerous. Worship of a Jewish upstart like Jesus of Nazareth was an insult to the Roman authorities and proclaiming a kingdom other than Rome's was to pick a fight with the emperor. For that reason, John the apostle was exiled to the island of Patmos for his missionary work, and we read in Rev 2:13 of Antipas who was martyred at the hands of Domitian. According to tradition he was slowly roasted to death in a bronze kettle.

We know nothing of this kind of risk in the 21st century western world. Persecution and martyrdom have reached an all-time high in the past century in Africa and Asia, but I experience no threat for worshiping Jesus in North America. This is both good and bad. It's good because I have freedom to worship; and it's bad because I'm part of a larger culture of Christianity that is not distinct from the rest of society. Much of the church today is a bland, watered-down version of first century Christianity. It's easy to be lulled to sleep in the lap of luxury. When there are no negative consequences for worshiping Jesus, we forget how privileged we are to know Him.

The biggest religious event in the emperor cult was called the Roman Triumph. Rome's army was an awesome war machine, devouring neighboring nations at will. When the armies returned home from a military campaign, they paraded the captured soldiers naked in the streets behind the decorated chariots of the Roman general or emperor. The Caesar was portrayed as "victor and savior." (Savior or *sōtēr*, meant "the one who brings good fortune.")

The distinguished dignitaries would dress in magnificent costumes of triumph, using design motifs taken from the temple of the god Jupiter, which was a popular cult in that time and place. As the procession of conquerors and slaves passed by, the Roman citizenry would sing of the greatness and power of Rome. "Great is your power and wealth and honor!" they shouted as the rulers of the land processed in their regal finery.

Against this backdrop of emperor worship, the followers of "the Way" are exalting a different King. Because the Christians had seen a much more glorious King than the Caesar, and a far superior country than their earthly one, because they had seen the Lamb who was slain who had " … purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9), they boldly worshipped Jesus, attributing to Him the very same qualities for which the Roman Imperium was exalted:

In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" … "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev 5:12-13).

When the heavenly worshipers are saying “thou art worthy,” they were thinking about the infinite worth of God and letting it saturate their hearts and minds. The songs from Revelation became part of the worship liturgy of the Roman Christians. By singing these songs, they passed through a portal into the light of the invisible Kingdom. They sang as citizens of an invisible country that was far superior to the glory of Rome.

This band of first century believers, so tiny in comparison to the loyalist Roman population, knew that they were a kingdom of priests in a spiritual nation that would outlast even this world-dominating Roman Empire. They had seen the unrivalled glory of the resurrected Lord, the worthy Lamb. From then on, their lives became a fountain of worship; they were living for a heavenly reward.

Desperation or Discipline

If we skip ahead through the next few chapters of Roman history we find the Roman Emperor Constantine converting to Christianity in the early fourth century and ending of the persecution of Christians. It’s fascinating to note that only a few years after Constantine’s conversion we see the advent of monasticism. The first century Christians had banded together in secrecy to worship and encourage one another in the faith, their times of corporate worship offering an oasis and a safe hiding place.

Yet after Christianity was legalized there were no more cruel emperors who crucified Christians and threw them to the lions. No longer was desperation for survival a catalyst for corporate worship. One of the major factors in the rise of monasticism was the need to establish regular habits of consistent corporate worship. Devout Christians were looking for ways to stay focused on Jesus and to live faithful lives, so monasticism became one popular choice.

I don’t believe becoming a monk is the right answer for most of us, but choosing a disciplined life of worship is the right answer for any Christian. We all need to bring structure and consistency to both our public and private worship. It’s the only way to keep the bright vision of Jesus always before our eyes. Without it, we default to the gods and goddesses of our age. We lose sight of eternity.

The progression from persecution to monasticism as a catalyst for worship, in early Roman times, points out a few aspects of human nature—we tend to be lazy and easily distracted. When life becomes easier, our felt need to seek God decreases. This was true for the Laodiceans who had “lost their first love,” and it’s true for us now.

In my relatively carefree middle class existence, I must find ways to "behold the Lamb of God" everyday if I'm going to keep a fire of love for Jesus burning in my heart. To create a pathway for Jesus to shape my character and the choices of my life, I have to live as a Treasure seeker. I need regular experiences of life-giving worship, as described here by Richard Foster: "To worship is to experience reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community."[5]

> Henri Nouwen once asked Mother Teresa for spiritual direction. Spend one hour each day in adoration of your Lord, she said, and never do anything you know is wrong. Follow this, and you'll be fine. Such simple, yet profound advice. Worship is the act of the abandoned heart adoring its God. It is the union that we crave. Few of us experience anything like this on a daily basis, let alone for an hour each day. But it is what we need. Desperately. Simply showing up on Sunday is not even close to worship. Neither does singing songs with religious content pass for worship. What counts is the *posture of the soul* involved, the open heart pouring forth its love toward God and communing with him.[6]

In our busy world, we are so easily overwhelmed with other activities and seemingly important priorities. But the spiritual discipline of worship is for everyone.

> God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings; people who have jobs, who care for children, who must wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities. If they are to have any transforming effect, the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life: in our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors.[7]

In the absence of life-threatening oppression from an anti-Christian government, we must make the choice of worshiping together. In the absence of feeling desperate for God, we need to make daily choices to touch the life that is truly life, found only in God. We must draw a line and not allow worship to be trumped by other pursuits. The only way I can stay passionate for Jesus the King is by worshiping Him, both privately and publicly.

Revelation and Worship Lead to a Change in Behavior

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, describes the alternate reality we see in John's Revelation. Jesus invites the apostle John to "open the door and come in." John sees heavenly worship, and he sees where history is going. He describes our universe as "an alternate side-alley reality," and heaven as "the main street of reality." In the main street of heaven, we see a world that makes our world look insignificant and temporary.

John brings us with him on this tour of heaven, helping us get out of the back alley of life on earth and into the mainstream of reality, to see how things are from heaven's perspective.

Tim Keller describes the progression: from revelation, to worship to a change in behavior. He states "There is an awe, which leads to a joy, which leads to a change in behavior, which leads to a major investment of yourself in that object."[8]

Several years ago my family spent three months in Hong Kong with a group of former drug addicts who had found Jesus. Many of these were members of an infamous gang called the Triads. Chung Jai was the leader of the ministry campus on which we were staying. Before he met Jesus, Chung Jai was one of the toughest, most feared of all the Triads. When he found Jesus he became one of the gentlest, most sensitive and compassionate men you'll ever meet. These are the dynamics of genuine worship. There is a fundamental change in our nature, behavior and our goals.

When we find the treasure of Jesus, and yield to him, he transforms us. Some things that were once paramount lose importance. We see eternity and build our lives around it. What's at stake is far more than singing a few songs on a Sunday.

Seeing Leads to Bowing

Our sense of privilege as worshipers is expressed in humble surrender before the holy One.

In the Book of Revelation we see the multitudes as "They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God" ((Rev 7:11). One of the Hebrew words translated "worship" literally means "fall down," itself a symbolic—and actual—act of surrender.

In Revelation chapter 4 the twenty-four elders saw the glorious Lord and cast their crowns before him. We all know that crowns represent leadership, power, and authority. In laying down their crowns, these leaders were handing over control. Herein lies a key point of worship for all believers: worship always leads to the surrender of control. You cannot worship without casting down your crown and losing control. Says Tim Keller:

> Anything that is the most important thing "has the crown" … If you live for power, power has got you under control, if you live for control, control has got you under control … the person who is desperate for acceptance is controlled by the people he or she seeks to please.[9]

William Sperry writes, "Worship is a deliberate and disciplined adventure in reality. It is not for the timid or comfortable. It involves an opening of ourselves to the dangerous life of the Spirit."[10] It is "dangerous" because it requires us to let God sit in the drivers seat while we become a passenger.

These first century Christians had died to this world, to the power of sin, and to their needs and desires. They had seen many of their brothers around them die for the sake of the gospel. They had decided to live for God's dreams, desires, and will. And it was because of all this that they were not afraid to die again.

They would have been familiar with the earlier writing of Paul to the church in Rome, in which he gave a definition of worship: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:1).

As one friend of mine so aptly put it: “It’s not worship until *you* are the sacrifice, until *you* are on the altar.”[11]

Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize

We see fervent devotion among the early Christians, but we also see indifference.

John could have been writing directly to the twenty-first century church in North America when he said, “You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Rev 3:17). Surrounded and enticed by wealth, their love for God had fallen into decay.

The church in Laodicea (modern day western Turkey) was the wealthiest city in that region during this era. “It was widely known for its banking establishments, medical school and textile industry.”[12]

John confronts these believers with three metaphors that directly apply to their local situation. Laodiceans took great pride not only in their financial wealth, but their extensive textile industry and a well-known eye salve. John steers them back to true wealth, righteousness and revelation: “I counsel you to buy from me *gold* refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and *white clothes* to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and *salve* to put on your eyes, so you can see” (Rev 3:18, emphasis added).

Jesus offers the salve of his Holy Spirit to take away sin’s deception that so easily blinds us. And he offers us his pure robe of white as he calls us to offer our bodies as instruments of righteousness. The pathway to this renewal of worship is an intimate meal with Jesus, the one who says: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

This scripture is often used as a prelude to an altar call for non-believers. But it wasn’t written to unbelievers. This is Jesus’ offer to come and sup with believers whose affections for Him have waned. It is a powerful picture of intimate fellowship, of friendship, of the God who seeks a relationship of mutual love with us. His honesty may begin with a “rebuke and discipline,” but it leads to peace and well-being.

The life of worship is marked by continually turning away from distractions and back to our true treasure. It is marked by habitually remembering the privileged position and

purpose we're called to—bearing the image of God in a broken world. And it is marked by a regular use of "eye salve" to help us see our magnificent God.

Staying Focused on the Treasure Doesn't Happen by Osmosis

To set our minds on things above, where Christ is seated is a discipline of worship that alters our view of daily life; we need to fill our mind with the story of God. The book of Revelation gives us fantastic—as well as sometimes bizarre—images to fill our imagination with the realities of heaven. Like much of the rest of God's living word, Revelation can saturate our imagination with a picture of God in all his glory and of the wonderful destiny for the followers of the Lamb. That perspective changes the way we live today. As Paul says, " … Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think" (Rom 12:2).

In describing the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky sexual affair in the White House, an American politician said, "Righteousness doesn't stand a chance against the imagination."[13] This statement is obviously made by a man who hasn't experienced resurrection power. Of course, the power of the human mind to fantasize is great. John Calvin said, "The human heart is a factory of idols … Everyone of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing idols." But are we powerless to overcome sinful thinking?

Not according to scripture. Imagination is part of the creative nature God gave us and He doesn't want us to be afraid of it or defeated by it. God's reality as seen in the Revelation baptizes our imagination and replaces narrow-minded thinking and sinful fantasizing with a life-defining eternal picture.

In his book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard says, "The process of spiritual formation is one of progressively replacing those destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself."[14] If we feed our minds and spirits with the beauty of God, our imagination can run wild with good things.

To change our behavior, we must intentionally practice spiritual disciplines. James Bryan Smith, in his book *The Good and Beautiful God,* prefers the term "soul-training exercises" instead of spiritual disciplines. "The problem is not that we do not want to change, nor is the problem that we are not trying to change. The problem is that we are not training."[15]

For centuries, sincere Christians have found ways to develop healthy habits for spiritual formation. In Richard Foster's classic book *Celebration of Discipline* he lists three major categories of the disciplines: the Inward Disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting and study, the Outward Disciplines of simplicity, solitude, submission and service, and the Corporate Disciplines of confession, worship, guidance and celebration.

Foster describes the purpose of the disciplines as "liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear."[16] The word "discipline" may immediately conjure up images of sour-faced religious people who never have any fun, but Foster makes it clear that "Joy is the keynote of all the disciplines."

I have found that transformation by the Holy Spirit is supernatural but also very gradual, that "the speed of information is very fast, but the speed of godliness is very slow."[17] There are fantastic moments of revelatory breakthrough, but changing my behavior happens slowly.

I am painfully aware of sin reigning in my body when I lapse into a spirit of greed or struggle with resentment towards someone who has mistreated me. I see ingrained patterns of sin in my life—ways of thinking that are not Christ-like. Sheer willpower won't enable me to conquer my weaknesses. I need real inner change. Without ongoing spiritual formation, our dark inward parts will at times be expressed in our behavior:

> We have no intention of exploding with anger or of parading a sticky arrogance, but when we are with people, what we *are* comes out. Though we may try to hide these things with all our might, we are betrayed by our eyes, our tongue, our chin, our hands, our whole body language. Willpower has no defense against the careless word, the unguarded moment.[18]

To seriously confront the unsanctified areas of my life, I have to intentionally give myself to spiritual disciplines. This isn't "pulling myself up by my bootstraps" by an act of self-will. It is cooperating with the grace of God by praying, meditating, studying, serving, submitting, confessing and worshipping, etc. None of these "soul-training exercises" would be possible or fruitful without the help of the Holy Spirit. He is there to help us pray, to give us understanding and to give us the desire to do what is right.

Righteousness *does* stand a chance if we organize our lives to include spiritual disciplines. Our man Terry Herbert had an incredible breakthrough when he found the Anglo-Saxon treasure. But he found it only after years of consistently waving his metal detector across countless damp acres of farmer's fields. While it is true that Jesus takes the initiative to rescue us, it will take lots of digging to unearth all the riches of glory he has in store for us. It will take years of pursuing Him and the things that are important to Him. The journey of worship is part adventure and part discipline. None of it is about luck, quick fixes or instant highs.

Is Jesus our passion or is he a hobby on the side? Does he rate somewhere around watching your favorite sports team or shopping for new clothes? If he really is our passion, we'll make a point of saturating our minds with his truth. We'll spend time in a quiet place, inviting wisdom to work its way into our hearts. We'll gather with other believers to experience the incarnate Christ in our midst. We'll find ways to use our time,

treasure and talents to serve others. We'll work every day to "cast down our crowns" and remember the alternate but permanent reality of heaven.

Jesus is always standing close to us, ready to give us salve to put on our eyes so we can see his kingdom. He's always standing at the door and knocking, ready to come in and eat with us. He promises to keep changing us from glory to glory if we'll keep seeking His treasure: "So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image" (2 Cor 3:18 NLT).