

God is Holy

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Bible Text: Psalm 99

Preached on: Sunday, July 12, 2009

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Let us turn in the Old Testament to the book of Psalms, the 99th Psalm. For these few weeks in the summer on the Sabbath evenings while a number of our congregation is away, I want to interrupt our series on John's Gospel and take it up again at the end of August and on these Sabbath evenings, we're going to look at some of the Psalms which we sing together and in our service in a few moments, I want to look with you at this 99th Psalm. Let us read this chapter of God's word. Psalm 99, verse 1.

1 The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! 2 The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. 3 Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! 4 The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. 5 Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! 6 Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called upon his name. They called to the LORD, and he answered them. 7 In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them; they kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them. 8 O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. 9 Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy!

This is the infallible word of God.

Let us turn to Psalm 99 in the prose version of the book of Psalms and consider it together so that as we sing it we may sing it with understanding. It's a Psalm which is easy to do divide into three parts because there is a chorus which comes at three points in the Psalm: at the end of verse 3, verse 5 and verse 9. Verse 3, "Holy is he!" Again, verse 5, "Holy is he!" And then at the end of the Psalm, "The Lord our God is holy!" If we wanted to give the Psalm a title, we could call it "Holy, Holy, Holy." It reminds us of the cry of the angelic beings in Isaiah 6. The subject of this Psalm is the holiness of the God who is King so it's a quieter, more reflective Psalm than some of the ones which have preceded it and it's appropriate that we're using two rather quiet reflective melodies as

we're singing the Psalm and worshipping this evening. Psalms 96 and 98, for example, are very exuberant, excited, joyful Psalms. Their subject is the Lord who reigns but here, the mood is more solemn. There is a reverence; there is a quietness because it's not just the Lord who reigns but that he is holy, transcendently and utterly holy.

This is the Bible's favorite description of God. It tells us this about God more than anything else: the first thing we remember about God is that he is a holy God and yet that is a word that is hard for us to understand. We talk about God being holy, we pray, "Hallowed be thy name, let your name be made holy," but what does holiness mean? I think we go astray because we tend to give it a secondary meaning rather than a primary meaning. We usually think of holiness in terms of human goodness: goodness, morality, purity. If we were measuring on a scale we might say that a terrorist would score 10% on the holiness scale; he is someone who isn't a very good; he isn't very holy. A burglar might score 15% on the scale; he's a little bit better but he's not very holy either. The average person might score 40% or 50%. You might like to think that if God were to give you a mark, you might get 50%, a passmark on the holiness scale. Somebody who's really very, very good, a saint – I shouldn't use that word, we're all saints – a supremely good individual, the best person you ever met, you might say, "Well, they could maybe score 75%." They wouldn't get full marks because nobody's perfect but they would get a high mark. And then we would say God, however, would score 100%. God is perfectly holy.

But that isn't really an adequate understanding of what God's holiness means. It's clear in the Bible that God's holiness isn't primarily an ethical or moral quality at all. That's part of it as far as we're concerned, it's a very important part; as far as we're concerned, in our holiness, it's the most important part but not with God. In the Bible we see that God's holiness is first and foremost his otherness. His otherness. God's difference from his creation. The fact that God is in a category of his own. That there is no one and nothing like God. God is transcendent. God is unique. You can't put God in the same category or class or grouping as anyone or anything else. God's holiness is his otherness. And, of course, part of that otherness is his absolute moral purity and that's the part that's particularly relevant for us but we need to keep that basic idea in mind and you can illustrate it very easily from the Bible. A holy mountain was not a mountain that was morally good, it was not a kind mountain or a truthful mountain or a forgiving mountain, it was a special mountain. It was a mountain you didn't walk on, you didn't stand on it. It was different from all the other mountains. You had a whole range of mountains and then you had Mount Sinai and it was the holy mountain. It was death to go up onto that mountain or a holy place. It was not a place that was morally good, it was a place that was different from all other places. A holy vessel or a holy garment was a vessel or a garment that was unique, that was separated, that was different from all others. That language is given in the Old Testament to help us to understand that the holiness of God is his otherness. His otherness. This Psalm, I think, is very, very helpful because in it we can identify three components of God's holiness, one from each of the sections of the Psalm.

So let me look at them with you briefly this evening. First of all, the first section, in verses 1 to 3 we could say there is majesty. We could use many other words to say what

we mean: dignity, greatness, grandeur, authority, stateliness. Majesty is that quality which produces in us a sense of awe and wonder. When we look at majesty, we're awestruck, we're filled with amazement, we're silenced. We pause and we gaze and we feel overwhelmed and we feel small. Here is something that is above us and beyond us, that is infinitely great and when we look at it, we're absolutely overwhelmed by it. That's what people used to feel, not so much nowadays, when they would speak to a king or a queen and they would describe that person as, "Your Majesty." Here is someone who is greater than everyone else.

That's the picture of God in these first three verses: the majesty of God. Friends, in the 20th and 21st centuries, we have a real problem with majesty because the age in which we live is not favorable to developing an awareness of majesty. We live in the age of the critic and the comedian and the debunker. We live in the age of the cynic and the sneerer. We live in an age when people are pulled down instead of being built up. In the early 1900s, a new kind of biography began to be written about great figures. It began really with a man called Lytton Strachey, a very immoral man who published a book sneeringly called, "Eminent Victorians." Up to that stage, the biographies of great people showed them to be great and admirable and told us about their good qualities and their good achievements. Strachey brought in a new style of biography where you talked about the faults and the flaws and the dirty little secrets of these great people, when you pulled them down and mercilessly exposed their humanity and their shortcomings and that has gone on to a large extent in our day. We've all, I'm sure, been absorbed in the recent scandal of MPs and their expenses and their payments and their claims and I must admit to you, I have read it as avidly as anybody else and with as much negative enjoyment as any of you but I'm not proud of that. It isn't good for us. There is a tremendous mood of sneering and cynicism in our country. Nobody's great. They're all in it for the money. They're all in it for themselves. That may actually be largely true of our political leaders but it's a very sad and unhealthy condition for human beings to be in for we need heroes; we need great men and women to whom we can look up, who can serve as examples. And in this mood, people get intoxicated with their own cleverness and they become sneering and cynical and in all of this, it's hard to reverence, to worship, to wonder.

This is damaging for us as Christians for within this toxic atmosphere we can lose our sense of the great, great majesty of God. Yet sometimes, we can recapture it. I remember years ago our family went and visited Niagara Falls on the border of Canada and America and for a few moments we were silent at just the awesome majesty of those millions, millions of tons of water, cascading over the falls day and night, year after year. Go to the Alps and you look at the ranges of snow-covered mountains and the majesty of creation. You look at a little baby, a newborn baby, and you're filled with wonder and awe. Look at this little human being, so perfect, so intricate. There's something dead in you as a human being if you don't feel a sense of wonder at a little baby. You hear of a supreme act of courage or kindness and the tears come to your eyes and something moves you in your heart. Here is something great. Here is something praiseworthy; something commendable; something above the norm; something other.

That's part of what the Bible means by God's holiness. The Psalmist here says, "The Lord reigns." He sits enthroned upon the cherubim, the Lord is great. Do you remember that Isaiah said, "Behold, the nations are like a drop from the bucket and are accounted as dust on the scales." The greatness, the majesty, the awesome otherness of God and look at what the Psalmist says the result is to be, "Let the peoples tremble. Let the earth quake." He is exalted over all the peoples and all mankind and all its activities are suddenly dwarfed and brought to nothing before the awesome majesty of God, the great God. That's who we are forgetting today. We're so intoxicated with humans and our achievements and our cleverness and our plans and our activities. This Psalm brings us back to the great God who reigns over all and the whole universe is just a pinch of dust to him, a puff of breath and the whole universe would vanish into nothingness. That's God. That's who God is. He just spoke and the whole universe came into being. One syllable from his mouth and the whole universe would vanish, all of us would vanish. This is God. Unbelievable, overwhelming majesty.

So we should approach God with awe, remembering his majesty. It's been lost in today's evangelical churches. "Your God is too small," J. B. Phillips wrote a generation and a half ago. Today people are too comfortable in God's presence; they are too casual; they are too irreverent. We must nourish a sense of reverence for God. That's why, for example, we as elders have been coming in for a few moments early at the beginning of each service just so that we all have the opportunity to sit quietly for a few moments and think and prepare our hearts for the great God for whom we are about to come. We'll not be sitting and chattering and talking and then moving straight into worship. For just those few moments, we recollect and think and prepare. The great, majestic God. We need to meditate on the majesty of God. The Psalmist says, "Let them praise your great and awesome name." We need to feed that in our own hearts, the greatness of God. We need to transmit our sense of God's majesty to our children, to our grandchildren, to people who don't know God. We should be men and women who communicate our sense of the greatness of God and we should be humble men and women, not full of ourselves, not thinking of ourselves but when we come here, filled with a hunger for God and a desire to exalt him. I don't matter. You don't matter. God matters. He's the one. Let us worship God. It doesn't mean let us stand up and start singing, it means what it says, let us worship God. Majesty.

Then in the second part of the Psalm, the next component of his holiness is righteousness. Verses 4 and 5, righteousness. This is where the comparisons with Niagara Falls and the Alps break down completely because this God is majestic but he's also personal. He's also personal. He's not just a thing, he is a person with a will and this will defines what is right and is directed towards what is right. God is good and God does what is right and God loves what is right. Now, you might say to me, "Well, that's obvious, everybody knows that," but you're only saying that because you've been living in a country which has been Christian for hundreds of years. It's not obvious at all. Everyone doesn't know that. Read about the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, they weren't moral. They weren't righteous. They weren't good. They told lies. They acted treacherously in the legends. They were cruel. They were wicked. The deities of Hinduism are ineffably cruel and impersonal and wicked. It's by no means inevitable that God is righteous, it's a wonderful thing.

Supposing God were wicked? Supposing the great Almighty Spirit that rules over the world was wicked? And cruel? That's a wonderful thing. It's a glorious thing. To the ancient world this was a new revelation. God is good, the Israelites said. The people with their Baals and their Ashtoreths and their other heathen gods, that was a new thing and a wonderful thing. Look at what the Psalmist says, "The King in his strength loves justice." Literally, the King's strength loves justice. All of God's strength, his infinite strength, is wrapped up in justice and devoted to justice, to doing right. That's why we have God's law. God's law tells us what he's like. And because God loves justice, this holy God is concerned for a just society. Look at what the Psalmist says, "You have established equity. You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob." The nation of Israel was meant to be a pilot plant to the world, a little colony of heaven on earth. That's why God gave his laws to Israel so that as they lived, the rest of the world could look at them. That's why he planted Israel in what has been called the Piccadilly Circus of the world. Israel is placed in the center of the globe. Even today, the land of Israel is the place where three great continents meet: Europe, Asia and Africa. And they all come together on that little place, and on that little spot of earth. That's the center of the world today. It's still the center of world politics, of world concern. That's where people think the next world war, if there is one, will break out. That's what America and Russia and China are focusing on, that part of the earth, the crossroads of the world and at the crossroads, God put his people and he gave them his law and he said, "This is how you're to live. You are to be honest, and kind and compassionate and loving and truthful and pure so that the whole world can look at you and see this is what God wants."

But Israel, tragically failed. They failed their mission and so now the church is the Israel of God and we are to live to show the world how people are to live together. Friends, we know what has happened to our nation in the last 50 years. Our nation has repudiated the Bible and the teaching of the Bible and the standards of the Bible and what sort of a society are we living in now? It wasn't perfect 50 years ago, far from perfect, but it was a lot better than it is now. Our nation is destroying itself. God loves justice. God established equity. God's holiness is righteous. My friends, that should give us great joy tonight. Goodness isn't just a feeble dream. The universe isn't cruel. It's not meaningless. Behind and above and beneath everything is goodness, infinite goodness. That's the rock on which this universe is built: infinite goodness, total righteousness. That is the great eternal reality behind everything else, is righteousness. You see, if you're a thoroughgoing evolutionist, there is no such thing as love or beauty or truth or goodness or meaning. These things don't mean anything. They are just pathetic fantasies. They are just survival strategies. But the Bible tells us that these things are real, they are reflections of God, they are implanted in us and when we do what is right, we are fitting in with the very structure of the being behind the universe and right will triumph and fill the universe and at the end, there will be nothing but righteousness and goodness and holiness through all eternity.

Majesty, righteousness but then thirdly and lastly, in verses 6 to 9, God's holiness means grace. Holiness is an intimidating thing. We tremble before God because we are his creatures. We tremble even more because we are sinners. When Isaiah saw the holiness of God, he cried, "Woe is me for I am undone for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord

of hosts." That's a proper reaction. We should fear the holiness of God. When our fear of God isn't present, there's something terribly wrong. But friends, that's not all of God's holiness and that's not God's last word for this holy God may be known and approached and loved and served without any diminishing of his holiness. We have had hints of it already in the Psalms. Wonderful. We haven't time to expand on it but look at verse 1, "The Lord reigns, He sits enthroned upon the cherubim." Where were the cherubim? Do you remember? Our studies in Numbers? They were in the Holy of Holies at either end of the Mercy Seat. Two golden statues of angelic beings; the place where the blood was offered for forgiveness was obtained and mercy was given to sinners. The Psalmist says, "Where is it that this holy God sits enthroned?" He sits over the Mercy Seat. He sits at the place of forgiveness. There is the gospel right at the beginning of the Psalm. His feet are resting, as it were, on the blood sprinkled Mercy Seat. Again in verse 5, "worship at his footstool." And in the Old Testament, that's a common term for the Ark of the Covenant. Again, taken into the Holy of Holies, the place of mercy and forgiveness and salvation.

This is where we worship this holy God, that is at the Ark, at the Mercy Seat. But in this section, these hints are broadened out and made much more specific. Note for example, this holy God answers the prayers of his people. The Psalmist tells us about Moses and Aaron and Samuel and he says, "They called to the Lord and he answered them." For, yes he's majestic, he's righteous, but when sinners cry to him, he answers them. More than that, he speaks to them and guides them. The Psalmist goes on, "In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them." Day-by-day, he led them through the wilderness; he showed great kindness to them; he provided for them. He's not a weak God. He's not a slack God. He's not indifferent to sin. The Psalmist says in verse 8, "you were an avenger of their wrongdoings." When they sinned he punished them. You remember Moses? Moses was excluded from the Promise Land. Moses suffered for his sin. We're not to trade on God's mercy. We're not take sin lightly. We're not to presume on his grace.

But that's not the whole story. The Psalmist also says in verse 8, "you were a forgiving God to them." You were a forgiving God. Here again is the gospel. He provided a way by which sinners could be pardoned and their sins taken away. The psalmist tells us how Christ is in this Psalm for this phrase that the ESV translates, "you were a forgiving God," in Hebrew literally means, "you were a God of sin bearing." You were a God of sin bearing. There is the wonder of the gospel. This holy God somehow, somehow took our sins upon himself and we know from Isaiah 53 how that was done: he bore the sin of many. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. So here's the wonder of the gospel, of the holiness of God in this Psalm. It's majestic. It's awesome. It's intimidating. It's righteous. But it's also full of grace and mercy. The flame of God's holiness has burnt itself out on Christ and as we come into his presence, that holiness doesn't destroy us, it draws us for it is loving holiness, redeeming holiness, transforming holiness, holiness that doesn't lead us to say, "Let me get away from you, God," but say, "Lord, how beautiful you are. Let me come to you."

So the chorus of the last verse is changed. The first chorus, "Holy is he!" The second chorus, "Holy is he!" The third chorus, "The Lord our God is holy!" The Lord our God is holy. The sin bearing God. The forgiving God. The God who sits enthroned between the

cherubim over the Mercy Seat. The majesty is still there. The righteousness is still there. But the last word is given to the longing to trust that Christ the Lord our God is holy. This leads us also to look to the day when God's holiness will be fully known. It will be terrible to others but to us it will be the completion of our salvation for we shall be like him. We shall see him as he is. Amen.

Let us bow in prayer.

Help us, Lord, to worship you more, to think about you more, to be filled with wonder and awe and reverence, to understand, Lord, your greatness, your otherness. Thank you, Lord, that you are righteous, that your holiness means goodness, that underneath all reality is infinite, everlasting goodness and purity in love. And our desire for these things is not a fantasy or an idle dream but a reflection of our creation in your image and our new creation in Christ. And thank you for your grace that in the person of the holy Lord Jesus your awesome, majestic holiness is clothed with mercy and kindness. And for our Lord and Savior, who by his life and death has made this possible so, God, with the Psalmist we call you holy but we also call you the Lord our God through Jesus Christ. Amen.