

Holiness

Psalm 99 paints an amazing picture of our holy God. This psalm makes it abundantly clear that our God is not some sort of made-up myth or fantasy. He is not a useless stone idol that is incapable of hearing cries for help or responding in any way. He is not helpless, weak, foolish, or uncaring. The reality is that our God is full of power and might. He reigns over all things and makes the world itself tremble:

Psalm 99:1: “The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble: he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved.

2 The Lord is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people.

3 Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy.”

You see, *the Lord reigns!* God does not sit in Heaven and watch the world go by. He does not idly lay around and watch nations rise and fall as one might watch a television program. God is not disconnected from His creation, but instead actively reigns over it. He is the one who raises up kings and who removes them from power. He is the one who blesses people or curses them. He is high above all peoples and nations, and He requires everyone to bow down and worship Him. He is the true sovereign – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He commands everyone to worship Him or else face His wrath.

Many people think that God is some sort of cosmic genie who only exists in order to grant our wishes. Others believe that He is some kind of harmless grandfather figure who would never hurt anyone. However, the Bible tells us that both of these pictures are wrong. Our God is a God of justice, who passionately cares for the righteous and opposes the wicked. He loves the truth and He executes judgment and righteousness:

Psalm 99:4: “The king's strength also loveth judgment; thou dost establish equity, thou executest judgment and righteousness in Jacob.

5 Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy.”

God is against the wicked, but He is merciful to those who seek forgiveness and grace. He will not overlook sin, but He will forgive those who repent. Likewise, He is with all those who call upon Him:

Psalm 99:6: “Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among them that call upon his name; they called upon the Lord, and he answered them.

7 He spake unto them in the cloudy pillar: they kept his testimonies, and the ordinance that he gave them.

8 Thou answeredst them, O Lord our God: thou wast a God that forgavest them, though thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.”

Our God is a very *active* God. He reigns over the nations and He guides history along the course He wants it to have. He shows mercy on the repentant and He takes vengeance upon the wicked. He hates evil but loves righteousness. Above all else, however, our God is **holy**:

Psalm 99:9: "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is holy."

One of the key characteristics of God is His unfathomable holiness. All throughout the Bible we are told that our God is a holy God. His holiness is beyond our imagination. In fact, His holiness is so staggering that it has been hidden from our sight. There are only a few people who were given the privilege of entering the throne room of God and seeing His holiness, and those who did were overwhelmed by what they saw. When Isaiah stood in the presence of God and saw the Lord on His throne, he was filled with horror at his own sinfulness:

Isaiah 6:1: "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

5 Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

The complete and total holiness of God was so great that it made Isaiah see how *unholy* he actually was. Even though Isaiah was a godly man who feared the Lord, he instantly realized that in comparison to God he was utterly unclean and wretched. Just standing in the presence of God was enough to make him cry out that he was undone.

This is what it is really like to stand in the presence of God. This is what it is like to experience a level of holiness that we cannot even imagine. Not only is it overwhelming, but it is *convicting*. It is easy to think that you're holy, but it is something else altogether to walk into the presence of Holiness itself. That is when it becomes very clear just how far off the mark you really are.

God's holiness far surpasses that of anyone else:

1 Samuel 2:2: "There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God."

Revelation 15:4: "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest."

There is simply no one else like Him. Everything about God is holy. For example, the Bible tells us that God's **name** is holy:

Psalm 99:3: "Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy."

Psalm 145:21: "My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever."

Incidentally, this is why it is such a great sin to take the name of the Lord in vain. The name of God is *not* just another name; it is holy, and it reflects the holiness of God. It is a terrible sin to take something that is holy and debase it by using it as a curse:

Deuteronomy 5:11: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

The name of God is holy, and we must treat it that way. In fact, failing to keep the Lord's name holy is so serious that it can have national consequences:

Hosea 4:1: “Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel: for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land.

2 By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood.

3 Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away.”

I find it fascinating that in the world today it's common to see news stories about millions of fish that have suddenly died for no apparent reason. Huge numbers of animals are dropping dead on a daily basis, and no one really seems to understand why. Maybe the reason these strange events keep happening is because *the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land*. Maybe it's because God takes His holiness seriously, and there are actually *consequences* to sin.

The Bible also tells us that **the place where God dwells** is holy:

2 Chronicles 30:27: “Then the priests the Levites arose and blessed the people: and their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to his holy dwelling place, even unto heaven.”

Psalms 20:6: “Now know I that the Lord saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy heaven with the saving strength of his right hand.”

Isaiah 57:15: “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Since God is holy, it makes sense that His home is holy. There are many different things that people think about when they imagine Heaven, but few stop to realize that Heaven is a *holy* place. In fact, the Bible tells us that Heaven is *the* “high and holy place”. It is a place that reflects the character of God. Since that is where God dwells, it is quite possible that Heaven is the holiest of all places.

In fact, Heaven itself is actually focused on the utter holiness of God. There are beings in the presence of God who never stop proclaiming that God is holy:

Isaiah 6:3: “And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Revelation 4:8: “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.”

When these beings say that God is “holy, holy, holy”, they are not just being repetitive. Each use of the word amplifies the one that came before it. Imagine that each repetition acts as an exponent, to raise the previous utterance by an order of magnitude. His holiness is utterly staggering.

Not only is God's dwelling place holy, but God's **words** are also holy:

2 Timothy 3:15: “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

This is why we call it the *Holy Bible*. It is not just another book; it is a holy thing from our holy God, and we ought to treat His words with great reverence and care. Far too many people let the words of God languish on their shelves, unheard and unloved. Do you really think it honors God if we can't even be bothered to read the words He has given to us? Do you think it pleases Him when we ignore what He has to say?

But what does it mean to be holy? When we say that God is holy, what are we saying? Well, if you look up the word “holy” in the dictionary, you'll discover that it defines holy as being like God or being set apart for divine use:

1. specially recognized as or declared sacred by religious use or authority; consecrated: *holy ground*.
2. dedicated or devoted to the service of God, the church, or religion: *a holy man*.
3. saintly; godly; pious; devout: *a holy life*.
4. having a spiritually pure quality: *a holy love*.
5. entitled to worship or veneration as or as if sacred: *a holy relic*.

When we say that something is holy, we mean that it is set apart for God's use. In fact, one definition of holy is “set apart”. In the Old Testament there were certain things that were set apart for Temple use. Since these things were holy, they were not allowed to be used by the common people for ordinary use. For example, the anointing oil was holy and could not be copied:

Exodus 30:31: “And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, This shall be an holy anointing oil unto me throughout your generations.

32 Upon man's flesh shall it not be poured, neither shall ye make any other like it, after the composition of it: it is holy, and it shall be holy unto you.”

God was very strict about this: the holy anointing oil *could not be used for anything else*. It was dedicated strictly for Temple service, and that was the only thing it could be used for. You could not make some and use it for the Temple, and then make some more and use it for something else. It was set apart for a specific purpose and it was a sin to abuse it for profane purposes.

That is what holiness meant: holy things were set apart, and could only be used for the purpose

that God designated. They had to be used in God's way, in God's time, for God's purpose, or else there would be very grave consequences. On top of that, those who used them had to do so with great care. When a person interacted with a holy thing, they had to stay holy themselves. Otherwise their lack of holiness could kill them:

Exodus 28:35: “And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he cometh out, that he die not.”

Exodus 28:43: “And they shall be upon Aaron, and upon his sons, when they come in unto the tabernacle of the congregation, or when they come near unto the altar to minister in the holy place; that they bear not iniquity, and die: it shall be a statute for ever unto him and his seed after him.”

The exact specifics of these two situations aren't really important to our discussion today. What matters is that Aaron had to be careful to do exactly as God said and maintain his holiness, because if he didn't he would *die*. In order to interact with a holy God he had to be holy himself. Holiness was not optional. It was a very serious business.

It is important to realize that *God has not changed*. In fact, the Bible tells us that God never changes:

Malachi 3:6: “For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”

James 1:17: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

In order to approach God and stand in His presence you must be utterly holy. Your sins must be forgiven and you must be blameless and without spot. The only way to obtain this holiness is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The reason Jesus came and died was to pay the penalty for our sins. Since He suffered in our place and took upon Himself the punishment that we deserved, we can be declared guiltless and set free. In other words, Jesus purchased our forgiveness with His own blood.

When we come to Christ, repent of our sins, and put our faith in Him, He forgives us and gives us His righteousness. When God looks at us He does not see our own sinfulness; instead He sees the perfect righteousness of Christ:

Romans 4:22: “And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.

23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him;

24 But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;

25 Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.”

If we are clothed in His righteousness, we can stand before God blameless and holy. However, if we are not clothed in Him then we will be cast out. Jesus warned about this in one of His parables. He spoke of a man who tried to enter a king's wedding feast without the appropriate attire. When the king saw him he cast him out:

Matthew 22:11: “And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment:

12 And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

13 Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

14 For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Those who try to enter Heaven wearing their own righteousness, instead of the righteousness of Christ, will be cast out. This is because our righteousness is utterly vile in the sight of God:

Isaiah 64:6: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.”

We are *all* unclean. We are all unholy – but Jesus can change that, if we come to Him.

Now, when Jesus saves us and gives us His holiness, He also gives us a new purpose in life. God has called us to be a holy people:

Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

Ephesians 1:4: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:”

Ephesians 5:27: “That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

1 Peter 1:15: “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;

16 Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”

God is very clear about this: since He is holy, He commands *us* to be holy. God has saved us for a purpose and called us for a reason. We are to be a living sacrifice, dedicated to holiness and set apart for the service of God. Just as the items in the Temple were set apart for divine use, so we are set apart for the service of God. We have been separated from worldliness and dedicated to God.

People act as if holiness is optional. The Bible says otherwise:

Hebrews 12:14: “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord:”

You see, our God is *serious*. He is not to be taken lightly, and His commands cannot be brushed aside as if they don't really matter. He once destroyed the entire world for its wickedness, and He has promised to destroy it again – this time with fire instead of water:

2 Peter 3:10: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.”

He is *very serious* about sin. In the Old Testament, if a priest approached God without the holiness that was required, he was instantly killed. You *had* to be holy.

We have somehow forgotten that God has burned entire cities to the ground because of their sin:

Jude 1:7: “Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

We have forgotten about the nations He has leveled and the civilizations that He has torn asunder. We have lost our fear of God and we treat Him lightly. Instead of looking at our sin in horror, as Isaiah did when he encountered God, we have become comfortable with it. We have lost track of the fact that those who remain in their sins and refuse holiness will be damned by God for all of eternity, and will be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

Those who are without Christ and are still living in their sins *must* repent while there is still time. If they do not – if they reject Christ's offer of mercy and grace – then they will face the wrath of God for all of the endless ages of eternity. Since they lack holiness and are corrupt, they will be tormented forever. Their lack of holiness will destroy them.

However, those of us who *are* in Christ must not neglect holiness either. We must pursue it, casting off our sins and seeking to live a life that pleases God. *This is not optional.* It's true that our works do not and cannot save us, but our works do reveal our heart. They show who we really are. If our lives are lacking in holiness, then that demonstrates that we aren't Christians at all:

1 John 2:4: “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

6 He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.”

You can say all day long that you are a Christian, but if your life lacks holiness then your faith is dead. You can make all the claims that you want, but your life proves who you really are. If you are living a carnal life of sin and have rejected the path of holiness, then you are not a Christian. It is not any more complicated than that.

Christians are people who God has saved and set apart for His use. If a person calls himself a Christian but does not follow God, then how can he possibly be set apart for God's use? How can you be a living sacrifice if you have rejected God and gone after your own way? It simply doesn't work that way. You must make a choice. You can follow holiness and find blessing, or you can dishonor God and face destruction:

Psalms 2:12: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.”