

4. He is Holy

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Date: 27 June 2012

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[0 : 0 0] Now let's pray together. Some words from the prophet Isaiah. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings, with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew, and one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And Isaiah said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

And Father, as we linger for those moments in your presence, to praise your name, and to listen to your word, like Isaiah, we are people of unclean lips, we are sinful.

And yet, in your wonderful grace, in the Lord Jesus Christ, one with you, who became one of us, and is one of us still, our eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

[1 : 2 2] As we look together into your word in these moments, Father, open our eyes to see who you are in your glory, in your holiness, and in your grace.

And open our eyes to see who we are, so much needing that grace, needing more each day, your grace to know. And for the world around us, the world of which we are part, we pray that indeed, not just this city, but every city, every community throughout the world, will indeed flourish by the praising of your name, and the preaching of your word.

And so, open our eyes, Lord, to see the King. Open our ears to hear what he has to say to us, and send us out, as you have sent out Isaiah, to bear that message to others, in all its saving power, and in all its glory and grace.

And we ask this, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, if you've got the Bible there, if you turn to page 500, and our psalm today, fourth of our psalms is Psalm 99, and we'll read that together.

Psalm 99. The Lord reigns. Let the peoples tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. Let the earth quake.

[2 : 5 6] The Lord is great in Zion. He is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he.

The king in his might loves justice. You have established equity. You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt the Lord our God.

Worship at his footstool. Holy is he. Moses and Aaron were among his priests. Samuel was also among those who called upon his name.

They called to the Lord, and he answered them. In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them. They kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them.

O Lord our God, you answered them. You were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain.

[3 : 54] For the Lord our God is holy. That is the word of the Lord. And may he bless it to us as we consider it together. I want to begin with one of my favorite books.

In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, even before Aslan appears, even before in the flesh he is there, who said anything about safe?

Of course he is not safe. But he is good. He is the king, I tell you. That, in other words, is what this psalm is saying.

He is not safe, but he is good. And he is the king. Now, last week we looked at Psalm 98, where the predominant theme was joy, gladness, the rivers clapping their hands, the hills singing for joy, and the Botswana choir helping us to make the rafters ring with his praises.

Today, this is a psalm which strikes a different note, but not a contradictory note. The note here is the note of holiness, the note of trembling, the note of awe, and the note of fear.

[5 : 16] Holiness is the eternal principle which guarantees that God is king, guarantees his victory, guarantees that he is not someone we can trifle with.

Now, we need both notes. We need the note of joy and rejoicing. We need the note of celebration, which Psalm 98 has. But if that's the only note, there is a danger of missing out on other aspects of the gospel, danger of missing out on the sense of sinfulness, the sense of unworthiness.

But we also need, that's why we need this note, holy is he, repeated, holy is he, the holiness of God. Now, if we have both together, our celebration will not be frivolous and shallow, nor will our seriousness be pompous.

That's the point. We need both together, because God is both up there and down here. God is in heaven, and we are on earth, as Genesis 1 makes it very plain, the rest of the Bible does.

But God is also on earth, and in particular, in the King, the Lord Jesus Christ, he came, as he came in flesh, and one day he will ruin over the whole world.

[6 : 42] Let's look at this psalm, three movements in the psalm. First of all, we have holiness enthroned, verses 1 to 3. The Lord reigns.

This is a statement that runs through so many of those psalms, Psalm 90 onwards, the Lord is King. Now, that's eternally true. It's true now. And in a sense, the only difference the second coming will make is to show the world that that is true.

God will be God, and the world will know it. So this is still a statement of faith. Just as, make a joyful noise to the Lord, Psalm 98, verse 4, break into joyous song, that's a statement of faith.

But so is, verse 1 of this psalm, he sits enthroned upon the cherubim, like the earthquake. That's why I turned our attention in the prayer to the prophecy of Isaiah, where Isaiah has a vision of the Lord enthroned, high and lifted up.

So at the moment, his kingship is hidden. And yet, his kingship is in the midst of his people. The Lord is great in Zion.

[7 : 50] When God's people, when God's people meet together to sing his praises, to listen to his word, to share the gospel, that is a sign that the Lord is reigning.

The Lord is great in Zion. Remember, Zion is not just the city of Jerusalem, although it is that, or more exactly, the hill on which David's city stood. This is all the people of God, from the very beginning, right back to righteous Abel, the very dawn of history, right up until the end of time.

So all the people of God praise him. And that's why, that's why in the Hebrew, the letter to the Hebrews says, you have come to Mount Zion, to the new Jerusalem, to the city of the living God.

It's the, if you like, the anticipation of the orchestra of heaven. Now, if any of you have had kids who learned to play an instrument, the tuning of the instrument isn't always, isn't always a beautiful sound.

My son chose the trumpet. And when he was learning to play the trumpet, that was scarcely a joyful sound. But it was worth it when he passed his exams, and so on.

[9 : 08] And then, that became, became quite pleasant to listen to. Now, remember on earth, when we sing together, when we meet together, we are tuning our instruments. We're not yet hearing the full orchestra, although we do hear echoes of it.

Remember the old hymn, When the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on our ear, the distant triumph song, and hearts are glad again, and hope is strong.

That's the idea here. And he is exalted over all the peoples. That means that he, as he is enthroned in holiness, and as his people sing his praises, then the earth hears.

The king, let them praise your great and awesome name. This is the name of the Lord, Yahweh, the God of the covenant. Yahweh, the one who is to reveal himself in Jesus, the Savior.

The name in which we pray. Now, we don't end prayers in the name of Jesus, just because we can't think of any other phrase to end a prayer with, but because what we are basically saying is, Lord, I know I don't deserve to be heard.

[10 : 18] I know I have no reason for you to listen to me, but there is a name, the name above every name, which will count, and which will, and in whose name can be answered.

So that's the first thing, and holiness enthroned. Holiness is enthroned now, but holiness will be seen to be enthroned in the future.

And then in verses four to five, we have holiness exemplified, what holiness looks like. Now, remember, when we say the Lord reigns, that doesn't mean he's a bigger bully who destroys the other bullies.

His reign is not one of brute force. His reign is one of character. The king in his might loves justice.

In other words, he's strong enough to enforce justice. He's not weak. He's not like the godlets of the nations. And it is justice and equity that his reign exemplifies.

[11 : 24] That's what holiness looks like. Holiness, I mean, holiness is one of those phrases we can use so vaguely. Look at a community. Where is holiness exemplified?

It's exemplified in justice and equity. You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Righteousness means putting hearts right with God.

All the gospels there. That's what Paul talks about in Romans and elsewhere. Making right. We are not right with God. And God makes us right.

God, our unholiness and our sinfulness is exchanged for the perfect righteousness of Christ. So, holiness is not a force which simply crushes other forces.

What happens when the kingdom comes will be perfect justice, perfect righteousness. And notice the choice of the word Jacob. The history of Israel exemplifies more of Jacob than it does of Israel.

[12 : 27] Remember this, Israel-Jacob parallel runs right through scripture. Deliberately put together, Jacob is what we are and Israel is what God makes us.

And the same is true of the church and the same is true of the individual. Exalt, verse 5, the Lord our God. Now that doesn't mean, of course, that God needs our praise.

But we need to praise him. To be truly human, to be truly what he made us to be, is to be truly grateful, to be truly obedient.

And that will exemplify itself in praise. After all, we don't particularly admire human beings who are always wanting to be praised.

You know the type of person who asks you how you are and you haven't a chance to answer and then they tell you how they are. Definition of a bore, someone who talks about themselves when you want to talk about yourself.

[13 : 30] And that's an unattractive feature of human beings. But with God, it's totally different because when we praise God, we are most truly ourselves because we are creatures.

We are not the creator. We are not self-made. Worship belongs to him. Worship at his footstool. Why? Holy is he.

So that's the second thing. Holiness exemplified. And then finally, in verses 6 to 9, holiness encountered.

Now, verses 1 to 5, in a sense, have been taught about the holiness of God and the great sweep of history throughout the created order, great and Zion, exalted over all the people, sitting enthroned upon the cherubim, the earth quaking.

But now it actually comes right down to be encountered in actual human beings. And we have three particular men mentioned, Moses, Aaron, and Samuel.

[14 : 37] They called to the Lord and he answered them. Now, these are three men who particularly experienced the holiness of God. Moses, especially on Mount Sinai, as Moses went up to the mountain, as he went up trembling himself, but covered by the grace, the compassion of God, and therefore was able to face that holiness.

Aaron, the high priest, who in the offerings that he was in charge of, saw object lessons of God's holiness. And after all, that's what the book of Leviticus is about, a series of object lessons of God's holiness.

God is holy. We cannot simply burst our way into his presence. And if you read chapter 10 of that book, you'll discover that Aaron's sons tried to do that and they were destroyed for their impiety and unholiness.

And Samuel, particularly, this is referring to, kept his testimonies, the statutes that he gave them. Samuel raised up at a time when the nation was most unholy.

Read the end of the book of Judges, chapters you can scarcely read in public. They are so appalling, gang rape, idolatry, every kind of sin you can imagine.

[15 : 52] And then, at that time of crisis, God raises up the prophet Samuel. And Samuel calls the nation back to God. Now, they were outstanding.

They were unique. We're not Moses and Aaron and Samuel. We know that. But, like all of the people in Scripture, while they are unique and have a particular place in salvation history, their God is our God.

And the way they approach that God is true for us as well. What did they particularly do? What particular things were associated with them? The particular things that's associated with them is in verses six and seven.

They called to the Lord and they kept his testimonies. These are the two things that marked these men. Over and above their unique places in salvation history, particularly Moses' unique place.

There is no one in the Old Testament whose authority supersedes or bypasses that of Moses. And yet, what they did is open to every believer.

[17 : 03] They called to the Lord, he answered them, they kept his testimonies, and the statute that he gave them. And flash, and if you flash forward to the New Testament, that's the priority as well.

The apostles established that priority that we will give ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word, the praising of his name, if you like, and the preaching of the word.

And look at verse seven. In the pillar of cloud he spoke to them, they kept his testimonies, and the statute that he gave them.

How did they encounter the holiness of God? Now they encountered it, of course, in the case of Moses, in the case of Aaron, in the case of Samuel, and Isaiah, and others. They encountered that, in a sense, face to face.

But you'll notice they kept his testimonies. Where do we encounter the holiness of God today? We encounter it particularly as we listen to his word, don't we?

[18 : 05] as we engage with that written word which so fully and faithfully points us to the living word. This word in which God has revealed himself.

The holiness and his love and his compassion. And only insofar as, like Moses and Aaron and Samuel, we honor and love his word, can we expect to experience his presence.

You see, the holiness of God is not a vague and general concept. The holiness of God is something that affects every part of the universe and every part of our lives.

And in verse 8, notice both the positive and the negative sides. Positively, you were a forgiving God to them, the honor of his name and the covenant he established.

God had compassion. And forgiving is so important. We depend totally on his grace. Oh, to grace, how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be.

[19 : 12] We depend totally on grace. And so did they. Never listened to the idea that in the Old Testament salvation was by works and in the New Testament by faith.

Right from the beginning, read Hebrews 11, by faith Abel, by faith Noah, by faith Moses. It was always by faith. Particular way it was exemplified in the Old Testament was by the keeping of the law and the offering of sacrifices.

But, it's the same forgiving God, the merciful, compassionate God, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

In other words, this God judges. The love that will not let us go is the love that will not let us off either. This is not cheap grace as the brave German Pastor Bonhoeffer talked about.

This is costly grace. He is not a tame lion. So, he's forgiving and he is the avenger.

[20 : 18] Forgiving those who have come to him and trust his grace. Judging those who reject that grace. You notice the psalm ends. In a sense, I am returning to the beginning but with a more intimate note now.

The Lord reigns, says verse 1, let the people tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. Let the earth quake. Then the last verse, exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain.

For the Lord our God is holy. Notice the our God. not the God whom who belongs to us and whom we can patronize but the God who has most graciously met us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The holy mountain. Mount Sinai. The Mount Mount Zion. But also surely that other mountain outside the city wall where love and justice met and where the Son of God gave himself for us and for our salvation.

So you see how the whole psalm hangs together. It's not enough to say the words of verse 1. We need to say the words of verse 9 as well.

[21 : 37] If this God is holy, if this God is holiness enthroned, if he's holiness exemplified, and if we encounter that holiness, then we need to be certain that we exalt and worship him.

And remember, worship is not just singing, although singing together can be part of that. Worship is giving our whole lives to him. When the devil told Jesus to bow down and worship him, he wasn't asking Jesus to sing a chorus.

He was asking Jesus to give himself to him in obedience. He is holy. He is holy. But who is the one who is holy?

The Lord, the covenant God, the one who made heaven and earth, and who has come to us in wonderful grace, and who calls us to exalt him, to worship him, so that one day we will join that great multitude that no one can count before the throne of God and of the Lamb, and join the worship of the redeemed, and indeed of all creation.

Exalt the Lord our God, worship at his holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy. Amen. Let's pray. Lord, you are great and we are small.

[22 : 58] You are eternal and we are mortal. You are holy and we are sinful, and yet you have provided a way back into that holiness. You have opened a fountain for sin and uncleanness, and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You have come to us in all your power, in all your glory, and in all your grace. May that indeed transform our lives and keep on transforming them for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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