

Trembling at His Holiness

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[0 : 00] So, Psalm 99 is our subject today. Last week, if you were here, we looked at Psalm 98, and if you could turn, please, in the Bibles to page 500.

Psalm 98 is an exuberant, joyful psalm. This psalm strikes a more somber but necessary note. Psalm 99, the Lord reigns. Let the peoples tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. Let the earth quake.

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 Lord 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 also among those who called upon his name.

They called to the Lord, and he answered them. In the pillar of cloud he spoke to them. They kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them. O Lord our God, you answered them. You are a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

[1 : 26] Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain. For the Lord our God is holy. Amen. That is the word of the Lord. So let us pray.

The holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is filled with his glory. Father, as we look out on the world, we sometimes see little evidence, little sign that indeed the Lord is king. We thank you for the great reality that above the changes, above the chances of this mortal life, that you are reigning. And we thank you for these moments when we are able to draw aside from the ordinary business of life, from the good things and the bad things, and able to consider your word together.

And we pray, Lord, that you will speak to us. You will give to us a glimpse of who you are, who you really are, and not as often in our ignorance we imagine you to be.

And we ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I want to begin by reading from a book I used to read to my children when they were small.

[2 : 43] Some of you will not be surprised to know it's the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. This is where the children have come into Narnia and for the first time heard the name Aslan.

Aslan. And as they hear that name, they are strangely alarmed. Is he a man? asked Lucy.

Aslan, a man, said Mr. Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you, he is the king of the wood and the son of the great emperor beyond the sea. Don't you know who is the king of the beasts?

Aslan is a lion. The lion. The great lion. Ooh, said Susan. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.

Natural, dearie, and no mistake, said Mrs. Beaver. Does anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just plain silly.

[3 : 49] Then he isn't safe, said Lucy. Safe, said Mr. Beaver. Who said anything about safe?

Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you. He's not safe, but he's good. And that is very much the language of Psalm 99.

Now, in Psalm 98, those of you who were here last week will remember, the whole of creation is rejoicing. Wonderful, poetic language of the rivers clapping their hands, the seas, the mountains, and the hills in delight.

Here the note of trembling is predominant. Trembling at his holiness. He's not safe. Now, we need both notes in our Christian living and in our Christian worship.

If it's all exuberance, then there's a chance that we start taking God for granted. We become too easy and too cozy with him. On the other hand, if it's all somber, then we can become very, very dry, very, very dismal, and expect very little from him.

[5 : 02] So we need both. We need both notes. He is holy. That's the subject of this psalm. His holiness means he's totally different from us, totally other than us.

And in the prophet Isaiah, the seraphim, sing, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is filled with his glory.

And to repeat the word holiness three times is very unusual. We would say holy, more holy or holiest. But Hebrew, when it wants to suggest something that's greater, usually puts two words together.

And if it puts three words together, then that is suggesting something that is true only of God. He is holy. The Lord worships at his holy mountain, verse 9.

For the Lord our God is holy. So let's look for some moments then at this psalm. And first of all, there is holiness enthroned in verses 1 to 3.

[6 : 11] The Lord reigns. Literally, the Lord has become king. Now, there never was a time when the Lord was not king. There never was a time when he didn't reign.

But this will be especially true when the whole world knows it. You go into the street and ask people, did you know that the Lord reigns? They'll look at you as if you were mad.

Because it doesn't seem as if the Lord reigns. Is the Lord reigning in a world where there is murder, violence, drugs, a world of suffering, a world of death?

It doesn't look as if the Lord is reigning. So you see, when we say today the Lord reigns or Jesus is Lord, that's a statement of faith.

We look beyond the outward and believe that he is reigning. You see, it is true, but one day the whole world will know it.

[7 : 11] One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Let the peoples tremble. Now, if people really believe that the Lord reigned, if we believe that the Lord reigned, we would tremble.

Because it's not safe. When he comes, he is going to judge. That means he's going to put things right. That means he is going to judge the world. He's going to judge every individual in the world. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. We first read about the cherubim back at the beginning of the Bible, guarding the gates of Eden, guarding the way to the tree of life.

We read about them placed above the Ark of the Covenant, the place where God can meet with sinful people. So, you see, we tremble, but our sins can be forgiven.

Because the cherubim above the Ark of the Covenant, that was the place where a holy God met with sinful people. There's no way back into Eden. We can't get past the flaming sword.

[8 : 14] We can't get past the cherubim. But someone else, Jesus Christ, our Lord, has disarmed that flaming sword and has opened the way into the presence of the holy God.

Let the earth quake. Now, in many ways, it sounds crazy, doesn't it? And the New Testament realizes this. Paul talks about the scandal of the cross, that the death of a man 2,000 years ago should redeem the world.

That seems crazy. Now, if something's crazy, it's just crazy. But if something is crazy and true, then that transforms everything.

The Lord is great in Zion. Verse 2. Zion is the literal city of Jerusalem. But it's also the people of God throughout all time and space.

The letter to the Hebrews says, We have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, innumerable angels, the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

[9 : 20] And sometimes, of course, even in Israel's history, this was shown to be true. When David took the city of Zion and brought the Ark of the Covenant to it, then that was proclaiming God's kingdom on earth.

When in a much later generation, the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem, and King Hezekiah went and prayed to the Lord, who was enthroned between the cherubims, and the Assyrians were destroyed.

And on the day of Pentecost, when people from every nation came to hear the wonderful works of the Lord in their own language, then he was enthroned in Zion.

And when he died on the cross, when Jesus our Lord died on the cross, and rose again. That is another way of saying he is a great in Zion.

Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he. The name is the name of Yahweh, Israel's God.

[10:26] A name that the Jews thought was too sacred to pronounce. And in the New Testament, then we have God has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name.

The name of Jesus, every knee should bow. So you see, it's true now. But the world cannot see it. And often we can't see it.

Because the circumstances of our life and the troubles of our life obscure it. So that's why this is a statement of faith. Holiness is enthroned. God reigns.

The world has a future. It's not simply all downhill. The world has a future because the Lord is king. And secondly, we have holiness exemplified in verses 4 to 5.

The king in his might loves justice. You see, in this world, when one kingdom or one government replaces another, It's simply replacing one set of sinful people by another set of sinful people.

[11:31] And particularly if you have countries which are not democracies rolled over by dictators, very often what happens is the oppressed rebel.

And very shortly they become the oppressors because that's human nature. Humanity sees power as one power replacing another. Often you hear politicians of the governing party say, When we came to power.

Always another unfortunate phrase I feel. Much better if they say, When we came to office rather than when we came to power. But that's human nature. Lord Axe, a 19th century politician, says, Power corrupts.

And absolute power corrupts absolutely. But this is not a power which corrupts. The king in his might loves justice.

Notice that. He's strong enough to reign. But he's not just brute force. He loves justice. As we saw in the psalm last week, He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.

[12:37] When he reigns, there will be peace. There will be rejoicing. There will be true community and true love. And he creates a new heaven and a new earth. We are in his righteousness.

You have established equity. Equality. Which is politicians of all parties strive to create that. And genuinely and honestly strive to create that in most cases.

But in this world, it never seems to be quite possible. But in the new creation it will be. And righteousness in Jacob. Jacob.

Almost a summary of God's people's history. Remember that Jacob is what we are naturally. Israel is what he makes us by grace.

Exalt the Lord our God. Worship at his foot. So we don't exalt the Lord because he needs it. But because we need it. Why do we praise God?

[13:36] After all, we don't admire other people who are continually expecting us to admire them. Continually talking about their exploits. You know the definition of a bore is someone who talks about himself.

And you want to talk about yourself. And we tend not to admire that. Why is it that the Lord is different? Well, the Lord is different because he is holy. He knows that in order to grow and mature as people, we need to praise him.

Because praise enlarges us. Praise expands us. It's a great antidote to whinging and complaining, isn't it? And to exalt the Lord at worship at his footstool.

Now, the footstool is the Ark of the Covenant. But it's also the whole earth. The prophet Isaiah says, Heaven is my throne. Earth is my footstool. And he goes on to say, Whom will I look to then?

To one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. And this is picked up in Matthew chapter 5, where the earth is the Lord's footstool.

[14:47] So we need to reverence him. Worship at his footstool. Holy is he. So we have holiness enthroned. We have holiness exemplified.

And then in verses 6 to 9, we have holiness encountered. I must have had the alliteration bug when I was preparing this. I'm never very sure about alliteration.

But sometimes it's fine. But anyway, the letter is E. Holiness encountered. You see, so far it's been talked about holiness in the broad sweep of history and in the broad sweep of creation.

Now he's coming down to the fact that it's also experienced by human beings. Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. They were people who saw the holiness of God.

Moses particularly saw it at the burning bush and then at Mount Sinai. Aaron, particularly as he supervised the offerings when they were waiting to the holiest place once a year on the Day of Atonement.

[15 : 52] And Samuel as when God called him as a boy. And then when God judged Eli and his family. So, now you can see if you like, they were outstanding people.

They called to the Lord and he answered them. But this is applied to all God's people. Verse 8. O Lord, our God, you answered them. The Lord is not just the God of the great ones like Moses and Aaron and Samuel.

Well, he is our God as well. It's open to all. And it is the proper response to his holiness. In the pillar of cloud he spoke to them.

They kept his testimonies. See, worshipping God, saying he's holy, isn't just a matter of saying words. It isn't just a matter of attending services. It's a matter of how in our lives his holiness begins to shape us.

O Lord, our God, verse 8, you were a forgiving God to them. Notice that God's holiness is a forgiving holiness. We tremble at it. But it is that very holiness which remakes us into his likeness.

[17 : 06] And that's what the German monk Martin Luther discovered, that the righteousness of God was a forgiving righteousness. The righteousness of God, which destroys those who rebel and destroys those who disobey, also remakes and transforms those who obey, those who keep his testimonies and his statutes.

And avenger of their wrongdoings. It's mercy and judgment, the two sides of the same coin. Never the one without the other.

And you'll notice how the psalm ends as it begins with a description of, Exalt the Lord our God. Worship at his holy mountain. For the Lord our God is holy.

Now the holy mountain for us doesn't mean a specific place. Our church buildings are not holy places. It means the whole earth. It's interesting, the prophet Isaiah, when he's talking about the new creation, describes it as the holy mountain.

People will worship at my holy mountain. Jesus died outside the sacred enclosure, says the letter to the Hebrews, so that we can meet him everywhere.

[18 : 23] The poet Cooper says, Where'er they seek you, you are found, and every place is holy ground. You don't have to go to Jerusalem. You don't have to go to Galilee to meet the Lord.

Although if you ever get the chance to go to Jerusalem or Galilee, it's a wonderful place to visit, and tremendous atmosphere, and so on. But we can meet Jesus exactly where we are and as we are. So let me try and sum this up by saying one or two things. Why does God hear us? Why can we approach him with confidence?

Because he is totally consistent. He is totally righteous and holy. If we fall out with each other, as you know, one of the problems we have about putting things right, if we fall out with each other, is we're never quite sure how we're going to be received.

Will I make it worse? Will this person listen to me? And with God, we always know how he's going to receive us. If we are repentant and believing, he will welcome us.

[19 : 34] If we are hostile and disobedient, he will judge us. And part of his holiness is his total consistency. We know exactly where we are with him.

Now, of course, it's one of the reasons why we tremble. And if you read on in the Narnia story, it's always a good thing to do. When you get to the last battle, when the creatures meet Aslan, all of them tremble.

Some of them tremble and continue to look on him with hatred. And they disappear into the dark shadow on his left side. Others, through their trembling, meet him with joy and rejoicing.

That's what this psalm is saying. The psalm is also saying that God judges. There will be no righteousness. There will be no equity.

There will be no justice until God judges the world, until God removes the evil and the curse from his creation. But above all, this psalm is telling us to worship him.

[20 : 40] Now, there's a lot of sterile debate goes on about what the word worship means. Some people say it means turning up on Sundays or other times, meeting together.

Other people say it's our daily lives, present your bodies a living sacrifice. Surely both are true. Because if we are not worshipping God every day of our lives and the ordinary parts of our lives, we're not going to worship him simply because we meet together.

On the other hand, if we say we worship him every day of our lives and there's nothing special when we meet together, and effectively we are saying we worship God all the time except when we meet together.

When we meet together, it's those special moments when, if you like, we concentrate our worship. It's kind of like birthdays and anniversaries. If I say I love my wife all the time so I don't need to remember her birthday, then you would think either I was a dull dog or something had gone wrong with the relationship.

I think that's true of times when we meet together as well. Worship at his holy mountain. For the Lord our God is holy. As the poet George Herbert says, seven full days, not one in seven, I will praise you.

[22 : 02] In my heart, though not in heaven, I will raise you. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we pray that our lives may indeed worship you so that when we meet together at times like this that indeed our worship will be acceptable to you.

We praise you, that you are holy, that you are just, and that you are forgiving. We ask, Lord, that as we bring our service to a close by singing together to the praise of your name that we may indeed worship at your holy mountain for you are holy.
Amen. Amen.