

The Lord Our God Is Holy

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Date: 12 March 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight I would like us to turn back to Psalm 99 together. We're going to look at the whole Psalm, but we can read again at verse 9. Psalm 99 verse 9. Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy. During this past week it has been my absolute favourite weather. Sun and snow is my favourite weather of all. It was just absolutely beautiful when the snow came down and everything turned white and then for a couple of days it was flat calm. We had a frequent blue sky. You had the sun just glistening off the snow.

Everything looked so so perfect. It's just my favourite favourite weather. I've always loved snow. Snow is just just the best thing and I think I absolutely love Lewis, but if I could change one thing about Lewis it would be that we had more snow in the winter. Everything about snow is brilliant. Just everything. I love skiing. That's one of my favourite things to do and I've done it for a long time. I was very blessed to have a father who took me and taught me to ski when I was a child and I've loved doing it ever since. Love walking in the snow. Love building snowmen. Love throwing snowballs. Sledging. Even the noise it makes under your feet. You go outside and you've got that, oh it's just the best.

Just love snow and especially when the sun is shining and it's all glistening and white and perfect. Love snow for lots of reasons but the biggest reason that I love snow is because it always reminds me of the purity, the splendour, the beauty and the impeccable holiness of God. Nothing is white like snow. Fresh snow.

And when you have weather like we've had this week and for me that is just such such an amazing reminder of God. And it's the same if you ever go to the Alps or to any kind of snowy mountain range you can sometimes get days when the sky is cloudless, the sun is shining, you look out and all you can see is this vast mountain range covered in perfect white snow. So good speaking so powerfully about our holy God. And that's what I want us to think about tonight. That's what I was thinking about as I looked at my study and saw the snow and sun this week. That's what this Sam is highlighting. The fact that the Lord our God is holy. And as we think about that I want us just to explore that under two headings which are recognizing holiness and responding to holiness. And we'll just think about the two of these together for a week while tonight. So number one is reconciling holiness. Just to say my pen is not working so I would be drawing an arrow beside reconciling holiness right now but my pen is not working so we'll just do it the old-fashioned way. The key thing to understand, the key concept to understand in relation to holiness is the idea of something that is set apart, something that's separate. The Hebrew word for holiness and for holy comes from a root word that speaks of that idea of being set apart. So that's always a really helpful thing to start. Sometimes when we think of holy we can think like serious. You know, you think like a holy service is very serious or you can think of maybe something that's really really good, never never bad. That's that's that kind of holy person. They're very very good, very devout. And none of that's like wrong.

It's okay but it's not the main thing to think about. The first thing that should come into your head when you think holiness is you think set apart, something that is in its own special category. Now that helps us to make sense of something that we see frequently in the Old Testament where certain things are designated as holy. So I think I've got a few verses up here with you've got Exodus 26, it's describing the holy place and the most holy place all within the tabernacle. So the Israelites were going to worship God in this tabernacle which was a sort of rectangular shaped tent and in the middle of that tabernacle there was a particular place that was particularly holy, the holy place and within that holy place there was another place that was even more particularly holy, the most holy place which was where God himself came to dwell. And so that was that place that was set apart. You think you've got this whole camp of Israelites moving through the wilderness, the tent, the tabernacle, set apart, unique, special, a holy place. You had holy garments for the priests, you can see that in chapter 39 and verse 1 describing the garments made for the priests ministering in the holy place. They were holy garments, not everyday clothes, not for anybody just for particular people, holy garments.

[5 : 55] There's mention of holy oil in verse 25 there of chapter 30 used to be used for anointing and then reading on 26 to 29 you read about all the utensils and all the other things that were to be used as part of the sacrificial worship system and they were all to be consecrated and made holy. You can see that just at the bottom in verse 29. All of these things are holy because they're set apart, they have a special use. They're different from regular clothes, regular tents, regular utensils. And all of that is pointing us to the absolute utter unique set apartness of God. So when we talk about God, when we talk about God being holy, we are recognizing the fact that he is in a category all of his own and we should keep coming back to this in our minds. The fact that he is distinct from all the rest of creation. He is above all the rest of creation. He is bigger, better, stronger. He is just above it all. I don't have the words to describe it. He's just set apart. He's in a category of his own. Utterly unique, utterly, utterly holy. Some theologians have described that in the terms of otherness. The idea that God is completely other to everything else.

So he's not like a big version of the mountains or a big version of the sun or the stars or whatever. He's bigger than that, separate from that. He is other than that. He's different. He's in a category of his own. He is on another level.

He is holy. And all of that instantly takes us to the point where our minds are getting stretched to their limits. Recognizing that actually God is beyond what we can describe, beyond what we can understand. But that reality of God's holiness has many important implications for how we understand God. And we can see that if we look at some of the key words that we have in the Psalm in Psalm 99.

We go through this Psalm. It describes lots of things about God, all of which are emphasizing his holiness. But this recognition that holiness is talking about God at another level is crucial for us to be able to understand just what these words are meaning in relation to God. So I want us to just go through the Psalm and pick these out on our way through. So let's start with verse one. This is a great example of what we call parallelism in Hebrew poetry, in the Psalms. You very often see this pattern where a verse in the Psalms or in Proverbs or in any of the other poetic sections of the Old Testament, they follow a pattern called parallelism which is where it says the same thing twice. But the second time it says it, there's kind of an intensification or an amplification or an extra detail in terms of what's been said. So you can see very clearly here, the Lord reigns, let the people tremble, he sits enthroned upon the cherubim, let the earth quake. So you can see there's a parallelism, the Lord and he. You can see the parallelism reigns and enthroned.

You can see the parallelism between peoples and earth, parallelism between tremble and quaking. Same thing's been said but there's just this amplification, this intensification. It's a very common pattern in Hebrew poetry. There's a few things we can pick out. Starting with the parallel emphasis on God reigning, the Lord reigns, the Lord is enthroned. Now that's telling us that God is king and that's a theme that comes through this Psalm. You see it again later on and it's emphasizing the fact that God has authority, that God is sovereign over everything. Now you think okay that's straightforward enough but you have to think of that through the lens of God's holiness. God has a sovereignty and an authority that is at another level altogether. It's the highest, biggest, greatest level of authority that we can ever imagine and that's why you mustn't think you know you've got like if you think of all the kind of like the leaders in the Old Testament you think well you know you've got you've got

[10:58] Pharaoh here and you've got maybe the King of Babylon here and you've got maybe the Roman Emperor here and then you've got God here. A little bit above them all but you know just one bit. That's nonsense. It's like you've got all of these rulers from Pharaoh all the way through to Putin and Biden and everybody ruling today and they are nothing compared to God. His reign is just on another level altogether. He rules over every square inch of the universe over every nanosecond of eternity over everything that there is.

And that explains why you have the language in the second part of the two statements. The Lord reigns, let the people's tremble, the Lord's enthroned, let the earth quake. The sheer vastness of who God is leaves us tiny in comparison. And I think that's so important for us to recognize and Scripture does this elsewhere telling us that even the huge parts of earth are tiny, tiny compared to God. Isaiah 40 verse 12 is an example of this. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span and closed the dust of the earth and a measure weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance. That is such an awesome verse. You've got the first part describing how the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean and everything else in between is in the hollow of God's hand. You've got the stars, the galaxies, the billions of galaxies that there are and he measures them with a span. You've got the dust of the earth, you think of the Sahara Desert, you think of every beach, you think of every sandstorm. God holds it in a measure. You think of the vast mountain ranges of the Alps and the Himalayas and the Andes and the Rockies and everywhere else and God just puts them in his kitchen scales as a balance and weighs them. The magnitude of God is holy. So on another level and that prompts a trembling, a quaking as we stand before him. But that reaction of trembling isn't just quantitative, it's not just because God is massive and we are tiny, it's also qualitative that morally we tremble before a holy God. A God in whom there is absolutely no contamination, no undefilement, no impurity, utter, utter ethical sterility if you, if you, for one of a better phrase in the sense of just absolutely perfectly pure and we tremble before him because that's a different level altogether. That takes us into verse 2 of Psalm 99. Again, same kind of pattern is great in Zion. He is exalted over all the peoples. You've got the same parallel pattern there, you can see it again. This emphasis on greatness, this emphasis on him being exalted. That's again talking about God's authority, especially in comparison to other rulers.

As we were saying a moment ago, he reigns over all the peoples, not just in Zion, not just over the Israelites, but over all. That means that his holiness doesn't just set him above the nation of Israel in the small geographical area at the end of the Mediterranean. His holiness sets him above every people, every nation over every age of history. That means that his reign is never temporary.

Every single other ruler has a temporary reign, not God. His reign is not territorial. Every other ruler's reign is territorial because they don't own or rule over every square inch of the world. And his reign is not partial in the sense that he has to kind of share his reign or authority with others. No. His greatness is absolute and his exaltation is unequalled and unsurpassed. It's just nothing, no one, nothing. No ruler, no authority, no nation, no empire, no business, no nothing can compare with God in his greatness and his exaltation. The theme continues in verse 3. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Here the focus is on God's name. That's a way of speaking of everything that God is. Everything that God is is great and awesome. The word for great is actually related to the word tower, which I think is a really helpful image because it's just the idea of God's greatness towering over everything else.

And then you've also got the word awesome, which is one of my favorite words. Now when we think awesome, sometimes we can think that that means cool. And sometimes that is how we use it. Sometimes that's what it means. And of course, God is cool, very cool. But the word here really is more speaking in terms of something that provokes awe, even something that provokes fear. The Old King James Version translates that word terrible, his great and terrible name. Now we can't really use that word today because terrible today has only has connotations of something that's awful. But obviously 500 years ago it captured that idea of awe much more accurately. The fact that God is so great that he causes fear. Now this is where it's important to remember that something can be very, very beautiful, but it can cause you to also be afraid.

[17:10] And this came home to me very powerfully whenever in my former life as an engineer, whenever we were lifting something heavy. From time to time we would have to lift something, whether it was at the power station or sometimes it was something getting delivered to the workshop a new machine or whatever.

Sometimes it was boats. You would go and you would be lifting something and it would be something that weighs 5, 8, 10, 12 tons. And a good example of this was actually when we had to lift a boat that had just been completed. Somebody had bought a boat, they'd fitted it out with the engine and everything else and the boat was ready to be lifted onto a lorry and launched for the first time. And so we were involved in lifting this boat. Beautiful boat, really, really beautiful boat. It was perfect. But because it was being lifted for the first time, the crane drivers weren't completely sure where to put the slings. When you lift something, a boat, you have to put slings under the boat and you have to try and work out where to put them, whether they're front, back, middle, just to get the balance right. Because if the engine's at the back it'll be heavier at one end and you have to work out where to lift it so that it lifts evenly. We went to lift this boat, they tried to position the slings as best they could. They lifted it off the ground and the whole thing started sliding forwards. Now it had only come about that far off the ground, but in that time it was pushing forward and crushing the bits of wood that had been sitting underneath it. And you realized that this beautiful boat could crush you like that. Something beautiful also caused us to fear. And we all stood in awe, realizing this is a heavy boat. We need to be careful. And I think that captures a wee bit about what that word awesome speaks to us about God. Beautiful, but something you've got to teach, someone you've got to teach so seriously. I'm so careful. Let's go to verse 4. The word here, well there's loads of words here actually. Let me start with the word might. Speaking about God's strength. God's strength is holy. That means it's unmatched and that makes perfect sense. He's creator. He spoke the entire universe into existence. He has strength that is unmatched. He is the sustainer of all that exists. That involves strength that is unmatched. He is the redeemer. That involves strength that is unmatched. He is the protector of his people that involves strength and might that is unmatched. But the holiness of

God also means that his might is not just unmatched. It is also undefiled. And that is such a wonderful theological truth. The fact that God has immeasurable power that can never be bad. God has immeasurable power that can never be bad.

That is so good compared to the awful abuses of power that we see in the world and that we see in history. And that's emphasized by the rest of the stuff you've got in verse 4. Look at the look at the wonderful words you've got. You've got the emphasis on justice and equity, righteousness. God, the holy God who is set apart is uncontaminated, unconfiled. He cannot do anything that is bad or wrong or horrible or manipulative or twisted. And that's why he establishes equity. And that's so important to recognize. A holy God is utterly fair. In fact the whole concept of fairness comes from him. This is a mistake that so many people can make that we judge what happens in our lives and we think that God is being unfair. And that's to get everything the wrong way around. That the whole concept of fairness that we have comes from the God who himself is utterly fair. We've got no foundation for fairness if we pull God out of our worldview.

He is the one who's established equity. He's the one who loved and executed justice. Now it's helpful to think about that or it can be clearer to think about that if you think about the opposites. God is being described as king and it says he loves justice. He executes justice. Think of the opposite of that. A ruler who doesn't care about justice. A ruler who doesn't bring wrongdoing to justice.

[22:10] Nobody wants a ruler like that. God is holy which means he is a lover and an executor of justice. It also says there that he executes righteousness and again that's a crucial point. A holy God he does what's right. Not only that he actually defines what is right. And that's such an important thing for us to recognize as well. It is only from God that we get a definition of righteousness of what is right and wrong. He defines it. He does it because he is a holy God.

Verse 5 then tells us that because of that he's worthy of our worship. That's a great command for us to exalt the Lord to worship at his footstool. And yet the word footstool to me makes me just think of how you know how unworthy we are. We can only even like if we're good to come to him it can only be to his footstool.

He is holy. We are tiny and we're so small in comparison. Let's emphasize in verse 6 if we go through that. Speaking of Moses and Aaron as his priests. Samuel one of his prophets. All of that's the language of mediation. A priest is one that we have to go through to get to God. A prophet is one through whom God communicates in order to speak to us. All of that is emphasizing the fact that the otherness of God, the holiness of God makes a mediator essential. We can't just waltz up to a holy God. We have to come through a mediator. And that kind of inaccessibility of God is emphasizing verse 7. Speaks about the cloud out of which God spoke to Moses and Aaron. Speaks about the giving of God's law.

All of this is taking us back to Exodus chapters 19 and 20 when the Israelites came to Mount Sinai and there a cloud descended on that mountain. The mountain shook. Moses went to the top. He received God's law and everybody else was told do not come near the mountain. Do not touch it. All because God is holy. And so in the cloud you have his presence. God himself has come to meet with his people.

You have power. The whole mountain is being shaken and yet you also have everything shrouded in mystery. Because again God is bigger than we can understand. That moment on Exodus 19 and 20 where God comes down upon the mountain Mount Sinai is so crucial for understanding the holiness of God. How massive and powerful and unapproachable God in his holiness is. And as a holy God he gives them a law. A holy God defines what is right and wrong. He's the one who sets the standard. He's the one who sets the rules. He's the one who delivers his law. Because he alone is God. He alone is in that category that can tell his creation what we are to do. He sets the terms of his expectations on us as his creatures as we follow him. All of these keywords are just weaving a thread right through the psalm that emphasized so powerfully that the Lord your God is holy. He is holy. He's at another level. He is set apart. We need to think in these terms if we're going to recognize what holiness means. But with that in our minds we have to think about how we respond to holiness. It's not just a case of recognizing holiness. We have to respond to holiness. There's two things I want to say in terms of how we respond to the holiness of God. Number one, we do not want a God who's holy. Now when I say that I am trying to touch on an instinctive reaction that I think all of us can have when you think of God who is so unapproachable, so powerful, who's on another level altogether, who prompts such awe and fear and trembling and you think, I don't know if I want that. I don't want a God who's holy. And because of that we can recoil from God. And we do that because we feel vulnerable and exposed. And this is true. You see it particularly in the Old Testament again and again and again. People when they come into the presence of God, when they're confronted by the reality of who God is, they recoil because they feel so exposed and so vulnerable. Perhaps the most famous description of that is in Isaiah chapter 6. I'll read it out.

[27 : 44] 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. That's all the same language of Psalm 99. Above him stood the Seraphim. Each had six wings. With two he covered his face, 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 the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I 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. That language is so similar to Psalm 99, isn't it? And it's pointing us to the fact that the more we recognize and understand of God's holiness, instantly we become more confronted with the reality of our own sin. And this is the pattern for people throughout scripture. They come close to God, they instantly feel overwhelmed. In fact, often their reaction is that they think they're gonna die.

Samson's father Manoa met with God and afterwards said to his wife, we shall surely die, for we have seen God. The reality of our sin means that the minute we are confronted with God's holiness, we recoil. Because we cannot approach him. And that makes us want to avoid this subject. We want to avoid thinking about God's holiness. It's a hard thing to think about. It's a very, very intense subject. So you're thinking about God's holiness, you read the language of Isaiah 6, sort of Psalm 99, and it is intense. There's this recognition that actually talking about God, thinking about God, that is stretching us to our limits. And not only is it stretching our minds to our limits, it's exposing our hearts in all their bareness and vulnerability. And so you think, well, I want to avoid thinking about this. I don't want a holy God. I want God, but I don't want a holy God.

I just want to back off from this. And sometimes as a result of that, we can actually modify our view of God. So our desire to avoid thinking about this kind of holiness is to kind of tone down our view of God in many ways. So the result is that often humanity and people, and even we ourselves, when we think about God, we tend to just think of Him as like a kind of a wee bit better version of ourselves. So we think of the good examples in life. We think of a good leader or a good doctor or a good teacher or a good helper. And we think of God as all these things plus a little bit more. And we have this view of God that is maybe safer and maybe smaller and maybe a bit easier to handle. And when we do that, we tend to bring God down to our level as much as we can.

And so he's kind of safer. But of course, you bring God down. That's impossible when you remember what holiness means. Holiness means set apart, un-bring-downable in that sense. And there's a really dangerous consequence of this kind of like softening or modifying of God. What tends to happen is that it leaves us with a view of God that makes him look not much more important than everything else in life. So if you have a view of God that kind of pulls him down a little bit, modifies it and doesn't, you know, that doesn't recognize just the magnitude of his holiness. You think, well, you know, God's just one of many important things in life. And so God can be here. My job can be here. My family can be here.

My relationships can be here. My football team can be here. My holidays can be here. And God's just one of these many things. No, he's not. He can never be. And yet that's what we do because we don't want a God who's holy.

[32 : 40] We don't want a God who's holy because often for humanity and maybe even for you, a holy God is too big, too hard, too overwhelming. But I've got to ask you, is that really what you want? Is it really an easy God you want? Is it really a soft God that you want? Do you really want a God that just fits into a box that we make and that we tie to put it in? Nobody wants that because, yes, when we think about responding to God, we think we don't want a God who is holy. But do you know what the truth really is? The real truth is that we desperately want a God who is holy.

We desperately want a God who is holy because a holy God satisfies everything that we long for. Because everything that disappoints you in life, everything that hurts you, everything that lets you down, everything that causes your life to be rubbish, everything that breaks your heart, everything that's ever done that, has done it because it's stained and tainted by sin. It's just another part of this world that is such a tragic mixture of beauty and brokenness. God is set apart from that and that means that he is everything that you want. So you think about purity, God is set apart. That means that there is nothing ever impure in God, nothing, no deceit, no maliciousness, no twistedness, no unfairness, no cruelty, nothing but pure holiness, absolute undefiled goodness that can never ever ever diminish or be shaken. In God there is authority that is set apart, authority that is set apart at another level all together. That means that when he says something you can trust it. That means when he promises something he will keep it and that means when he says that you are his, nothing can threaten you because he has authority that nothing can match. His authority is our holy authority set apart so that nothing, absolutely nothing and no one can threaten him. That is everything that we want in a God. And in

God you have a holy beauty. You think of the snow this week and the sun just so beautiful. That's just a glimpse, just a glimpse of the beauty of God. You think of how beautiful God's creation can be. How beautiful is he going to be when he takes us into the new creation and we see in the face of Jesus Christ all the fullness of the beauty of our holy God. That is everything that we want to stand gazing at his beauty, enjoying the creative work of his hands all around us and marveling at the God who's just so beautiful and the God who's the source of everything else that is beautiful. In God we find everything that we actually long for. We actually desperately want a holy God who's pure, who has authority, who has so much beauty. But most importantly of all a holy God has something that we need more than anything else. And we see it in verse 8.

Did I put it on the screen? Maybe you didn't. I didn't. Look at your Bible, so verse 8. Verse 8 I'll read it out. I forgot to put it on the screen. It says, Oh Lord our God, you answered them. You were a forgiving God to them.

When we talk about the holiness of God we're saying that everything is on another level. So his power is on another level. His purity is on another level.

[37 : 33] His authority is on another level. His strength is on another level. But do you know what else is on another level in God? His mercy. His mercy and grace is a holy mercy. A holy grace. It is on another level. Now that is what makes the Gospel possible. And that's what makes the Gospel so brilliant. Because when you see at the end of verse 8 there it talks about how every wrongdoing has to be avenged. It does. Every sin has to be called to account every time our unholiness has made us unworthy of God. That has to be called to account. And God whose mercy is on another level takes that debt of sin that provokes his wrath and he turns it on himself. He turns it on his own son. So that you and I can be saved. Because his mercy and his grace is on another level. It is set apart. Now everyone we meet, everyone we're involved in whether it's work or family or whatever, there always reaches the point where the patience runs out. And you will know that whether you know you've tried to help somebody and yet just eventually your patience runs out. Or maybe you've been on the receiving end of that where you felt you felt the rebuke of somebody whose patience has run out.

Or maybe you've tried to help someone and you've not been able to help them. Maybe you needed help and they've not been able to help you. That's because our grace, our love, our forgiveness, our healing power is not on God's level. His grace, his power, his mercy is holy. That means his patience will never run out.

That means his mercy will never end. That means his grace will always always be amazing. In Jesus Christ the God who is at another level has poured out mercy and grace at another level so that we can be forgiven and healed. And this is where understanding the holiness of God is so important for understanding the Gospel.

All these things we've spoken about how God is so so big and so powerful and so pure. How he is so unapproachable. You think of Sinai, how God's cloud came down, how the mountain shook, how you could not come near him. You think about Isaiah who saw the throne of God and said woe is me for I am undone. You think about Manoa, Samson's father who said I've met God and now I'm going to die. You think about the holy of holies in the tabernacle and in the temple that you absolutely could not go near unless you were the high priest and even then you could only go in there once a year. You think about all the restriction that was placed around a holy God in the Old Testament. You could not go near that God because he is so holy but his holy grace and his holy mercy and his holy love is at such an amazing level that through the death and resurrection of his son you can now run into that God's arms and he will hold you forever more.

And that is why we desperately want a holy God. That the God who holds the whole universe in his hands is holding you and will never ever let go. The Lord our God is holy.

[42 : 08] Thank God that that's true. Amen.