

# ***“Holy God”***

## **PSALM 99**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1223)  
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Several weeks ago, our family had the privilege of visiting the Reagan Library out in Simi Valley, California. We enjoyed learning more about the 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, we enjoyed touring the plane that was used as Air Force One during Reagan’s term in office, we enjoyed the history – the original copy of the speech that was delivered at the Brandenburg Gate, the jar of jelly beans on the table in the replica of the Oval Office, the presidential limo, some of Nancy’s famous outfits, some pictures and video from Mr. Reagan’s time as an actor and as a spokesman for General Electric. We especially enjoyed showing our children something of what life was like when we were their age in the mid-1980’s. But when we arrived, we were very pleasantly surprised to learn of a special exhibit featuring Abraham Lincoln, another Republican president from many years earlier. And there was a good bit of space dedicated to the life and times of Mr. Lincoln. We have been to Ford’s Theater in Washington, DC (as well as to the room across the street where Lincoln was taken and where he died). We have been to Lincoln’s home, and tomb, and to the Lincoln Library down in Springfield, Illinois – we were there on the day when Mr. Obama first announced Joe Biden as his running mate (he did that across the street from the Lincoln Library at the old Illinois State Capitol). So we had already seen a lot about Mr. Lincoln, but at the Reagan Library exhibit, they had the blood-stained pillow where the president laid his head as he died. We had seen the bed where he died in DC, but at the time the pillow was on tour in Chicago (as I remember it). Well, we finally caught up with the pillow! It was right there in a glass box, and in so many ways it was just a normal pillow. It looked almost exactly like the pillow that I use at home – the same size, kind of off-white, a little bit dirty – it was the same as the pillows we might find at home, it was the same as the pillows used all over the United States in the early 1860’s. Not a lot has changed in pillow technology over the past 150 years! But here it was set apart in a glass box being looked upon almost reverently by hundreds upon thousands of people, all filing by in somber silence. Of all the pillows in the world, this one was almost sacred.

I would invite you to keep that thought in mind as we think for just a few moments this morning about the subject of holiness. In just a few moments, I would like for us to look at Psalm 99, and in this psalm, I would like for us to focus on the fact that God is holy. In our pew Bibles, Psalm 99 is found on page 952. As we are about to discover, God in this chapter is described three times as being holy. Whenever we find something repeated three times, we get the very clear impression that what we are reading is very important. And that is what we find here, ***“Holy is He”*** (at the end of verse 3), ***“Holy is He”*** (at the end of verse 5), and then ***“...our God is holy”*** (at the end of verse 9). God, therefore, is holy, holy, holy. And that right there should bring

several other passages to mind. We think of the scene in Isaiah 6 and also the scene in Revelation 4 where the four living creatures surrounding God's throne constantly call out, **"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty..."** (Revelation 4:8).

We studied Isaiah 6 back in February of this year, and in that study we learned that the word **"holy"** means "separate" or "set apart for a special purpose." My understanding is that it goes back to a word referring to something that is "cut," and so there is the idea that something is cut and then set apart – the item or the person is different from the rest. God, therefore, is holy – he is separate, he is different, he is special. And of course, then, everything associated with God is also holy. In the passage that we are about to consider, for example, we read about God's **"holy hill."** The hill is holy (or set apart, or special), because God is on it. Elsewhere in the Bible, we read about **"holy ground."** Moses was to take his shoes off, because he was standing on **"holy ground."** The ground was made up of everyday dirt and rocks, but it was holy on that occasion, because God was on it – God was in the area, and so the ground itself was special, or set apart. In the Law of Moses, we read about the **"holy assembly"** (Exodus 12:16). It was a gathering of rather normal people, but it was **"holy"** because God was to be present on the occasion. In the tabernacle and later in the temple, we read about the **"holy place"** and the **"most holy place."** Again, we are talking about a room in a tent or in a building, but the rooms were holy because those rooms were associated with God. We could go on to read about holy garments, and holy oil, and holy incense. In the same way, those rather normal items were made holy because they were set apart. Those items were associated with God. We think about the Bibles that we hold in our hands this morning. If you look several pages in, if you look at the title page, our pew Bibles are printed with the words "Holy Bible." Your own personal copy might say it right there on the front. To those who don't know, the books that we hold in our hands might seem rather normal, but we know that the words themselves are holy, because these words have come from God. We are studying a holy book.

And so we get back to the rather normal-looking pillow we saw several weeks ago. What made that pillow special was that was associated with one of the greatest presidents in the history of this nation. That normal pillow has been placed in a glass case and put on display, it is an item of national interest because of its relationship with a great man that most of us respect. Even among presidents, Mr. Lincoln is unique and distinct from the others, and so the pillow is now considered a priceless treasure because of that association. God, of course, is in a completely different category – there is no category – but I hope that illustration will help us appreciate something about the word **"holy"** – set apart or special. With this in mind, as we study the holiness of God and as we study what this means to us, let us please look together at all 9 verses of Psalm 99,

***The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble;  
He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake!  
The Lord is great in Zion,  
And He is exalted above all the peoples.  
Let them praise Your great and awesome name;  
Holy is He.***

***The strength of the King loves justice;  
You have established equity;  
You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.  
Exalt the Lord our God  
And worship at His footstool;  
Holy is He.***

*Moses and Aaron were among His priests,  
 And Samuel was among those who called on His name;  
 They called upon the Lord and He answered them.  
 He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;  
 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,  
 And yet an avenger of their evil deeds.*

*Exalt the Lord our God  
 And worship at His holy hill,  
 For holy is the Lord our God.*

- I. As we look at these nine verses, I would like for us to notice two very powerful ideas, starting with the very powerful truth that **GOD IS HOLY**.

In fact, the description is given three times. Someone has pointed out that God is called “**holy**” more often than any other title. And then on top of that, there is no other attribute of God repeated three times. In other words, nowhere do we read about angels crying out “Eternal, eternal, eternal.” We don’t find the heavenly creatures singing “Love, love, love,” or “Faithful, faithful, faithful,” but we do about God being “**Holy, holy, holy.**” God, therefore, is holy, and if we were to try to describe God in one word, the word “**holy**” might be the most appropriate word that we could use. We find in the first half of this chapter that God’s holiness is expressed 1.) In his great power, and 2.) In his sense of justice. So, God is holy and separate in that he is more powerful than any other human ruler and he is also holy and set apart in that his sense of justice is perfect in every way.

We start with God’s power in verses 1-3 as the author says that, “***The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble.***” These days, of course, we have no concept of a king’s power. When most of us think of royalty, we think of the royal family in Great Britain. They have been in the news a little bit lately, haven’t they! We have the royal wedding and now the royal baby. And when we see the royal family on the news, it’s usually about how they’re dressed or how they look (or in the case of Prince Harry, how he is NOT dressed). Usually we don’t think about the royal family today in terms of terrifying power. We certainly do not tremble in their presence. In the ancient world, though, kings were much more powerful than they are today. Kings held the power of life and death, kings could command, and the people obeyed, kings could levy a tax, and the people had to pay. There was no arguing with the king. And so the author pictures God as a king reigning on his throne.

But as we learn from the last part of verse 1, this is not a normal throne! Instead, the Lord God is “***enthroned above the cherubim.***” Today when many people think of cherubim, they think of these chubby little babies with cute little wings, maybe something we might see on a card at Valentine’s Day. In the Bible, though, cherubim seem to be a class or a rank of angel, and they are definitely not chubby little babies! In the Bible, cherubim are terrifying creatures. You might remember that cherubim with a flaming sword were posted to stand guard at the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were kicked out for their sin of rebellion against God. You might remember that golden cherubim were to be placed on each side of the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant. They were mighty terrifying creatures, and we find here that the Lord God is “***enthroned above the cherubim.***” So, first of all, we find that God’s holiness is demonstrated in great power.

As we continue looking at verse 4, we also find that God's holiness is demonstrated in his moral superiority. He never does anything wrong. He never causes anything to happen that is not right. We remember from the life of Christ in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus never had to apologize for anything. Have we thought about that? We as humans always have to apologize for something – we're always making mistakes. My two most common prayers to God are, 1.) Thank you, and 2.) I am sorry. But Jesus never had to apologize. In fact, God is fully righteous in every way. He is flawless and without sin. In verse 4, we read about how God the king loves **"justice,"** he has established **"equity,"** he has executed **"justice"** and **"righteousness"** among his people. Here on this earth, justice can seem elusive. All of us can probably think of court cases that we think should have gone another way. So many times, justice seems to be clouded – maybe the law itself is wrong, maybe somebody gets off the hook because he can afford a powerful attorney, maybe evidence gets mishandled and somebody who is clearly guilty is allowed to go free, maybe a jury is persuaded by emotion instead of the law – for whatever case, justice here on this earth can be difficult to attain. But we find in verse 4 that the justice of God is equal and firm, the justice of God is without partiality. God always does what is just and right. The holiness of God means that he has complete integrity. God is moral perfection. Most of us think, "Yes, that's good!" But then we realize what that really means. If God is perfect and demands perfection, where does that leave us? That leads us to verse 5, and really to each reaction in verse 1 and also in verse 3.

In response to God's great power, in response to his perfect sense of justice, we find in these opening verses that the earth is to shake, we find that the people are to praise God's great and awesome name, and we find that we are to exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool. We respond to God's holiness with reverent fear. We remember how Isaiah reacted to God's holiness in Isaiah 6. In Isaiah 6:5, Isaiah said, ***"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."*** Isaiah understood the holiness of God, and the prophet Isaiah reacted exactly as he should have reacted, with reverence. Isaiah got it! He knew the proper response. We think of those times today when the national anthem is played at a ball game. You can tell who gets it and who doesn't. Some will just keep on eating and talking with their friends. Others will pause and pay attention. In a slightly similar way, when it comes to the holiness of God, some understand and react with awe and praise, but many do not. The main point in verses 1-5, then, is that God is holy, and we respond with fear and praise.

- II. **Now, up to this point in this Psalm, we might get the impression that God is too holy, that God is too separate, that God is too distant, that God is too perfect for us to ever relate, for us to ever have a chance at a meaningful relationship. Thankfully, though, we have the rest of Psalm 99, because in the next few verses we realize that even though God is perfect and we are not, HE WANTS US TO BE HOLY – he wants us to be special and set apart, and he will work with us to make that happen.**

In verse 6, the author gives us three examples in the lives of Moses, Aaron and Samuel. We are told that these three men **"called upon"** the Lord's name and that the Lord answered them. In verse 7, God spoke, and these three men listened and kept the Law that God had given. We remember how God spoke to Moses in the pillar of cloud that led the Israelites through the desert. God spoke to Aaron as the first High Priest over the nation of Israel. God spoke to Samuel as one of the great judges of Israel. So here were three men who understood the holiness of God and did the best they could to be holy themselves.

But as we look at these three men, we realize something: As hard as we might try to be holy, it is impossible to actually be perfectly holy. Moses had some anger management issues. You might remember how he struck the rock instead of speaking to it, as God had instructed, and Moses was punished for that behavior. You

might remember how Aaron let the people build the golden calf and worship it. You might remember how Samuel did a horrible job of raising his own children, even allowing his own sons to commit sexual sin with the women who came to worship God. And yet even though these three men were far from perfect, we find in the Scriptures that God is a God who provides a way to make things right. Yes, they were punished, but in verse 8, we find that God was a **“forgiving God”** to them. By the way, the word **“forgiving”** goes back to a Hebrew word meaning: to lift, to carry, to take. God, therefore, is a God who lifts our sins. He carries the burden of sin. We think of Jesus who, **“...Himself bore [or lifted up] our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness”** (1 Peter 2:24). And because God has lifted our sins, he wants us do everything in our power to live holy lives. As Peter said in the previous chapter, **“...like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’”** (1 Peter 1:15-16). Because God is holy, we are to be holy, and when we slip and fall, God is there to lift us up, to lift the burden of sin so that we do not give up.

God is holy and awesome, he is separate, but he also wants to be close to us – he is a God of grace! As we sang this morning, he is a “Wonderful, Merciful Savior!” And to span the gap between God’s holiness and our sin, the Lord God sent his only Son. In Hebrews 7:26, we read about Jesus, our **“...high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens”** (Hebrews 7:26). You see, Jesus is holy, but he came to this earth to bridge the gap. God is holy, but through Jesus, we can be holy as well.

### **Conclusion:**

Holiness is a constant struggle. It is hard to be separate from the world. It is hard to be pure in every way. Some of you know that my wife has family in Hawaii, and we have wanted to see them for years and years. There have been some funerals we have missed, because tickets are normally outrageous at the last minute like that. So I remember checking Google maps several years ago (just to see if they had any ideas on how to get there), and their suggestion was to walk to San Diego and then to get in a kayak and start paddling for the next 1700 miles (or whatever it was). And you know, we briefly considered it, but we pretty much concluded that that would be impossible! We have no plans to paddle or swim to Hawaii. But you know, with help, that journey is possible. And that is what the Bible teaches about the struggle to be holy. On our own, there is no way! But with God, all things are possible. We lean on God for help. We lean on our Christian family for help. We lean on others who are also struggling to be holy. And that seems to be the main point of this Psalm – God is holy, and he wants us to be holy as well. Like Moses, and Aaron, and Samuel, we are far from perfect, but we can approach God, because God carries our sins far away. And with that, Psalm 99 comes to an end, **“Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His holy hill, for holy is the Lord our God.”**

Some of the first steps we take in response to God’s holiness are to believe that God is. God’s word then tells us that we must repent of our sins and that we are to be immersed in water so that our sins will be forgiven. Do you remember (in verse 6) how Moses, and Aaron, and Samuel were among those who called upon God’s name? That is not just an Old Testament concept! In Acts 22:16, after three days of prayer and fasting, Ananias said to Saul, **“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”** Moses, Aaron, and Samuel called on God’s name by listening to God and by doing what God told them to do. That was their way of calling on God, “Yes, God, we want to be holy like you.” But in these last days, God has explained that we call upon his name through the act of baptism. In the words of the apostle Peter, baptism is our **“appeal to God for a good conscience”** (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism is our cry to God, “God, save me!” Through baptism we are showing God that we need his help to make us holy. In your mind, is there any doubt about that? If so, then we would love to study the Scriptures with you. But if not, if you know what you need to do, if you have not yet obeyed the good news, we would love to help you with that. If you are old

enough to have committed sin, then you must be born again through baptism. If you are ready to do it right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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