

# Psalm 99

*Holy, Holy, Holy*

Psalm 99 is the Psalm about God's holiness. The Book of Psalms uses the word "holy" of God only six times. Half of those occasions are in Psalm 99.

The reign of God (v. 1) is first mentioned in Moses' Song of Salvation (Ex. 15:18). Interestingly, the Song also speaks of God's holiness (v. 11), holy abode (v. 13) and sanctuary (v. 17). The implication is that salvation has its source in God's holiness, and its goal is to make us at home in God's holiness (our sanctification).

## 1. Transcendent holiness, vv. 1-3

The key words here are: (a) the adjectives that describe God ("great", "high" and "awesome"); (b) the means of his coming (seated on the cherubim-borne chariot-throne); and (c) the effects of his presence (it causes trembling and shaking). The emphasis is on God's holiness as his "otherness". God is distinctive, supernatural, heavenly, transcendent. He is the Uncreated Creator – and the sheer otherness of his being impresses his creatures with a sense of reverence and fear.

C.S. Lewis describes the awe that settles on us in the presence of someone overwhelmingly greater than we are. He writes, "If you had caught one breath of the air that came from him, you would have felt yourself taller than before. Though you were a cripple, your walk would have been stately; though a beggar, you would have worn your rags magnanimously. Kingship and power and festal pomp and courtesy shot from him as sparks fly from an anvil. The pealing of bells, the blowing of trumpets, the spreading out of banners, are means used on earth to make a faint symbol of his quality. It was like a long sunlit wave, creamy-crested and arched with emerald, that comes on nine feet tall, with roaring and with terror and unquenchable laughter. It was like the first beginning of music in the halls of some King so high and at some festival so solemn that a tremor akin to fear runs through young hearts when they hear it."

The LORD is holy. There is an infinite separation between us – a separation of being. We are creatures – he is the Uncreated Creator.

Because God is holy, informal, light or entertaining worship is impossible. Worship is the most solemn, most significant thing we can do. God is holy, and we ought to be impressed by the tremendous Reality into whose presence worship brings us.

## 2. Moral holiness, vv. 4-5

God's holiness is not amoral (value-free) holiness. The active words are now "justice", "equity" and "righteousness"; these imply God's moral holiness. This is another way in which the true and living God is different from the "no-gods" of the nations. The gods of the ancient world were holy in the sense that they were treated as "set apart", and they had their holy ("set apart") mountain. But they were as wicked (morally unholy) as mankind.

All gods are not equal. The only God who is unambiguously good, righteous and true is the triune God who reveals himself in the Bible and through his incarnate

Son. His character is totally good and without any evil. With all his strength he loves justice and truth. He is morally holy.

Everything God does is good and right. His moral holiness underpins everything. (a) Creation is good, and although it is fallen because of our sin, it can and will be redeemed because of God's moral holiness. (b) Providence is good: God works all things for good because of his moral holiness.

The Psalm implies that, if we are going to worship the God who is morally holy (v. 5), then we must be morally holy too. God has redeemed us so that our lives will model his life: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2).

(a) *Definitive sanctification* When we are united to Christ we are definitively sanctified. We are constituted holy by God with respect to the power and mastery of sin. God declares that we don't belong to sin anymore – its claim on us has been invalidated and broken by the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

(b) *Progressive sanctification* We are commanded to "put on" (to model) the moral holiness of God, e.g. through acts of kindness; love of justice; a business run compassionately; truthful speech and faithful deeds; a community in which we give preference to one another in honour.

## 3. Propitiated holiness, vv. 6-9

The Psalm alludes to the Atonement Cover on the ark of the covenant: (a) the cherubim of v. 1 were represented as overshadowing the atonement cover with their wings; (b) the footstool (v. 5) may be a reference to the ark (1 Chron. 28:2); (c) Aaron's priestly duties (v. 6) included sprinkling the blood of the annual atonement sacrifice on the atonement cover. Propitiation was made on the atonement cover. So the final section of Ps. 99 tells us about propitiated holiness.

A propitiation is a sacrifice that turns away justified wrath. Because of our sin, we deserve to be punished. But a sacrifice of propitiation turns away the punishment. Propitiation and intercession go hand-in-hand.

Moses, Aaron and Samuel (v. 6) were famous for their intercession on behalf of Israel (Ex. 32:31-32; Num. 14:17-20; 16:47-48; 1 Sam. 7:5,9; 12:23). Moreover, when they prayed, God answered them. In particular, he answered them by delivering the Hebrew people from the consequences of their sins.

But how can God be both "God-Who-Forgives" and one who "took vengeance on their deeds" (v. 8)? This is an allusion to the events of Exodus 33-34 and the revelation of the glory of God in Ex. 34:6-7; God is the one "who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."

It is possible only because of the propitiation made by Jesus. In Jesus, God has executed judgement on his people's sins, and so, in Jesus, God is able to forgive his people. Thus God is both just (one who "took vengeance on their deeds") and the justifier ("God-Who-Forgives") (Rom. 3:26).

To unholy people, God's holiness is his most excluding attribute. But to those who have been forgiven and sanctified, his holiness is what makes him most desirable. The Psalm expresses this in its closing words: "Holy is the LORD our God."