

**“Holy is He!”**

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel  
Psalm 99

- <sup>1</sup> *The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!  
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!*
- <sup>2</sup> *The LORD is great in Zion;  
he is exalted over all the peoples.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Let them praise your great and awesome name!  
Holy is he!*
- <sup>4</sup> *The King in his might loves justice.  
You have established equity;  
you have executed justice  
and righteousness in Jacob.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Exalt the LORD our God;  
worship at his footstool!  
Holy is he!*
- <sup>6</sup> *Moses and Aaron were among his priests,  
Samuel also was among those who called upon his name.  
They called to the LORD, and he answered them.*
- <sup>7</sup> *In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them;  
they kept his testimonies  
and the statute that he gave them.*
- <sup>8</sup> *O LORD our God, you answered them;  
you were a forgiving God to them,  
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Exalt the LORD our God,  
and worship at his holy mountain;  
for the LORD our God is holy!*

**Introduction: One Bible, One God**

Recent polling suggests that while most Americans still believe in God, only about 54% of Americans say they believe in “the God of the Bible.” Interestingly, 20% of people who identified themselves as Christians said they didn’t believe in the God of the Bible. If you’re like me, you’ve probably heard many people say they like Jesus, but they don’t believe in the God of the Old Testament. Survey data seems to back this up, as only 54% of Americans say they believe in the God of the Bible, but 84% believe

that Jesus is an important spiritual figure. So, around 30% of people think that Jesus is pretty cool and important, but they're not sure about the God of the Bible.

That makes me wonder what Jesus they're talking about – probably the same as the God they believe in – something they've made up in their own imaginations.

But seriously, I do know even sincere Christians who sometimes struggle with reconciling their mental picture of the God of the Old Testament with their mental picture of Jesus. They think of the God of the Old Testament as a God of wrath and judgment, of impatience and even of violence. Then, they think of Jesus as loving, gentle, meek and mild. But both of these mental pictures really amount to an unintentional idolatry, because they are a distortion of who the one true God of the Bible is.

Jesus is the incarnation and human manifestation of the one true Triune Holy God of the Bible. Michael Reeves is one of my favorite theologians and writers today, and he points out quite simply and correctly that “*there is no God in heaven who is unlike Jesus.*” Jesus reveals the heart of God to us, as God has spoken to us in the Final Word of His Son, the Word of God made flesh, God in heaven come down in human form.

Many weary sinners breathe a sigh of relief at this thought, because it reassures them that God is actually loving, kind, gentle, and patient – as indeed, He is, as seen not only in Jesus Christ but also on every page of the Old Testament. Yet it is also true that Jesus is perfectly holy, just, and full of holy wrath against sin. Did you know that no one in the Bible speaks more clearly and frequently of the eternal judgment of hell than Jesus Himself?

God is who He is – the great unchangeable I AM – from the beginning to the end, from everlasting to everlasting. He is perfect in all His ways, unfailingly flawless in His every attribute.

### **A. Worship the Holy and Exalted God, vv. 1-3**

<sup>1</sup> *The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!*

*He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!*

<sup>2</sup> *The LORD is great in Zion;*

*he is exalted over all the peoples.*

<sup>3</sup> *Let them praise your great and awesome name!*

*Holy is he!*

Earlier psalms in the series of Kingship Psalms called us to joyful singing and noise-making to celebrate God's greatness and His marvelous works. Psalm 99 calls us to tremble before His holy presence.

God is “enthroned upon the cherubim.” When we think of cherubs, we think of the cute little baby-looking angelic images we see on some Christmas decorations. But the cherubim are majestic, terrifying creatures who surround the throne of God and give Him continual worship day and night. In Isaiah 6, we saw these cherubim having six wings: With two they flew, with two they covered their feet, and with two they covered their faces. So, these awesome angelic beings use twice as many wings to shield themselves from the intensity of God’s holiness than they do to fly.

And what do the cherubim around the throne of God cry out day and night in worship to the God who reigns, enthroned upon them? *Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD!* And what is repeated three times in this short psalm, at the end of verse 3 and verse 5 and verse 9?

- *Holy is He!*
- *Holy is He!*
- *the LORD our God is holy!*

Holiness is the essential attribute of God and the defining characteristic of all of His attributes. Jeremiah Burroughs, one of my favorite Puritans, said, “*The holiness of God is the height of God’s excellency.*”

Do you know what the oldest song in the Bible is? It’s the Song of Moses from Exodus 15, sung after the Israelites watch the Egyptian army drowned in the Red Sea. And here’s what we find right in the middle of this song -

*Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?*

– Exodus 15:11-13, ESV

From the beginning of the gathered worship of God’s people as His holy nation, we see that the right pattern for worship is to praise God for who He is and for what He has done. And the essence of who God is – majestic in holiness! He reigns over all in holiness as the Holy, Holy, Holy God!

From Exodus 15, we can jump all the way to Revelation 15 and one of the final worship songs of the assembled people of God seen in Scripture. And what are they singing?

*And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,*

*“Great and amazing are your deeds,  
 O Lord God the Almighty!  
 Just and true are your ways,  
 O King of the nations!  
 Who will not fear, O Lord,  
 and glorify your name?  
 For you alone are holy.  
 All nations will come  
 and worship you,  
 for your righteous acts have been revealed.”* – Exodus 15:3-4, ESV

Again, we see the worship of God for who He is – *“For you alone are holy”* - and for what He has done - *“for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

Gd’s holiness is His absolute transcendence from creation and from anything in creation that might defile. He dwells in unapproachable light; He is utterly unique, in a category by Himself – *“Who is like you?”* and *“You alone are holy.”* He is radiantly pure, absolutely unstained by any slight shadow. He alone is holy in Himself, and when He chooses anything or anyone for Himself, to be set apart by Him and for Him, that place, that thing, that person, or those people become holy – not because they are holy in themselves (only God is). But because God has said *“You are set apart as mine for my purposes,”* they are made holy by the holiness of God.

Thus, we have holy mountains, a holy Tabernacle and a holy Temple, the holy priesthood, holy prophets, holy days, and God’s holy people – named *“saints”* – *“saints”* simply meaning *“holy ones”* – *“sanctifieds.”* Holiness does not primarily mean moral purity, for mountains and tents and buildings are not moral in nature, but it means *“belonging to God.”*

The last holy thing we see in Scripture is the holy city, the New Jerusalem, a vision of the glorified church –

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”* – Revelation 21:1-3, ESV

The Holy City of the New Jerusalem is the glorified people of God, which is made clear in verses 9-11 of Revelation 21 –

*Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. – Revelation 21:9-11, ESV*

Think about that: The last holy thing we see in Scripture, the holy city Jerusalem, is us! You and me and Moses and David and Paul and Silas and all the glorified saints of God, gathering in the glorious presence of God forever!

In addition to the holiness of God, we are called in the opening section of Psalm 99 to worship God as great and awesome and exalted above all peoples. In our culture, we like to have debates about who the GOAT might be – the Greatest of All Time – and we throw around the word “Awesome” to describe everything from our favorite movies to an amazing trick someone does on a skateboard to our favorite dessert.

But just as God alone is holy in Himself, so also the adjectives “great” and “awesome” find their truest definition and fulfillment in God alone. No one is great and awesome like God is great and awesome, spinning out billions of galaxies by His word alone, and ordering all things according to the counsel of His will, reigning over the movements of heavenly bodies, the rise and fall of nations and empires, and seeking and saving His lost sheep one at a time. He is so GREAT and so AWESOME that He is exalted FAR above all peoples of the earth!

We need to remember this so that we are not too impressed by seeing stadiums full of screaming fans singing along with Taylor Swift or by seeing someone we actually know playing against the great Lionel Messi on television or by any human accomplishment. All of these lesser things are great in their place, but none of them are anywhere close to as great as God is great.

## **B. Worship the Holy and Just King, vv. 4-5**

And what is wonderful about our great and awesome God who reigns in holiness is that He is as just and righteous as He is great and awesome:

*<sup>4</sup> The King in his might loves justice.  
You have established equity;  
you have executed justice  
and righteousness in Jacob.*

<sup>5</sup> *Exalt the LORD our God;  
worship at his footstool!  
Holy is he!*

“*The king in His might loves justice*” could also literally be translated as “*The might of the King loves justice.*” God exercises His great and awesome might in the cause of justice – establishing equity, executing justice and righteousness.

Christians need to stop letting the world lead the discussion on equity and justice, for these things are so clearly central to God’s rule and reign as the exalted, holy King. Now to say that God establishes equity and executes justice is not an excuse to advocate for deeply flawed human understandings of these concepts in some Marxist sense. So, when I say that Christians need to stop letting the world lead the discussion in equity and justice, I also mean that we need to stop letting the world define the terms “equity” and “justice” and “righteousness” for us, but we need to have a truly biblical picture of these things.

It was God, in Genesis 1:26-28, who established the foundational truth of human equality by creating people – male and female – in His image, after His likeness – thousands of years before the Declaration of Independence. In Genesis 9, He established the death penalty for murder as vital to upholding the equality of all human life. In His civil laws for His people, He provided protections for pregnant women and unborn children, and He also called His people to treat aliens and strangers among them with equity and compassion. While God still permitted slavery in the Old Testament, He established the humanity of slaves and safeguarded their lives and many of their basic human rights. In fact, the very concept of universal human rights is ultimately rooted in a biblical view of the equality of all people as God’s image-bearers.

God chose and called an enslaved ethnic minority out of bondage in Egypt and powerfully judged and humbled the world’s great superpower to set them free. This example inspired William Wilberforce in the late 1700s in England to work tirelessly for the end of slavery, and Great Britain became the first great nation in the world to free all of her slaves and end slavery permanently, convicted by biblical standards of justice and equity.

1 Corinthians 1 tells us that God delights to choose the weak and foolish in the eyes of the world, the outcast and the despised, to shame the strong and the wise. He makes beggars His heirs and turns away the rich and proud as unqualified in their self-sufficient arrogance. Bernard Arnault, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Larry Ellison, and Warren Buffett – the Top Five wealthiest men in the world - all have something in common:

None of their wealth can buy them favor with God, and the poorest saint in the developing world has a more secure eternal inheritance than all of them combined.

In God's kingdom, you don't get a closer seat to King Jesus because you gave more money to His election campaign. The King who loves justice and has established equity in His kingdom does not take bribes or extend favors to people of worldly wealth and influence. He is HOLY – set apart from the world's rat race of competition for power and influence. He loves and redeems and glorifies as He sees fit. And if we would worship Him, we must worship at His footstool.

What is God's footstool? It is a reference to the Ark of the Covenant. Coming to worship the LORD at the Ark of the Covenant requires shed blood to be sprinkled on the mercy seat. We come to God pleading for mercy on the basis of the shed blood of the spotless sacrifice. Interestingly, in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament – which is the Bible the early church used and which the New Testament consistently quotes – the “mercy seat” of the Ark is called the “Propitiation” Seat – the place where Propitiation is made for God's people.

In Romans 3, God explains how He has ultimately established equity and righteousness for His people in His kingdom –

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*

– Romans 3:21-25, ESV

God makes no distinction – all who come by faith, trusting in the propitiation for sin made by Jesus, receive perfect righteousness from God.

### **C. Worship the Never-Failing Faithful God, vv. 6-9**

When we come to God through Jesus Christ, we join a long line of worshipers who have found God to be faithful through the ages to His people -

<sup>6</sup> *Moses and Aaron were among his priests,  
Samuel also was among those who called upon his name.  
They called to the LORD, and he answered them.  
<sup>7</sup> In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them;*

*they kept his testimonies  
and the statute that he gave them.*

<sup>8</sup> *O LORD our God, you answered them;  
you were a forgiving God to them,  
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.*

<sup>9</sup> *Exalt the LORD our God,  
and worship at his holy mountain;  
for the LORD our God is holy!*

We are part of a long, unbroken line of men and women who have come to God and have found Him to be not only Holy and Just, not only Great and Awesome, but to be a God who answers His people. God speaks to us in His Word! We take that for granted far too much, but it a wonderful and gracious accommodation to our need for God to speak to us in His word.

Not only does God answer us by speaking to us in His Word but He also forgives our sin when we confess and plead for mercy. What do Moses and Aaron and Samuel all have in common? They were all terrible sinners who needed God’s forgiveness.

- Moses was a murderer and a fugitive from justice. He also lost his temper before the people and struck the rock of God in anger saying, “*Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?*” (Numbers 20:10, ESV)
- Aaron made the Golden Calf for Israel to worship when Moses stayed too long on the mountain, and then he later joined Miriam in challenging Moses’ leadership.
- Samuel was a terrible father and allowed his sons to sexually exploit the women who served in the Tabernacle and to steal from the people’s offerings they brought to God.

Yet God forgave these great sinners who called on Him for the same reason that He forgives you and me and all other great sinners who call upon Him – because of the propitiation offered by Jesus.

The next line in Psalm 99 is humbling and sobering – “*but an avenger of their wrongdoings.*” God’s forgiveness of the sins of His people doesn’t mean our sin is without consequences. We still suffer and those around us suffer when we sin, even though God forgives. This should cause us to tremble in humility and gratitude and to hate our sin as much as we love our Savior. Jesus didn’t die so we could get away with our sin without consequences. That would not be loving or wise; He died for our sins so we could be forgiven and reconciled to God and have eternal life with Him. He died to make us holy, even as He is holy.



## **D. Our Holy, Forgiving and Atoning God**

Verse 9 closes Psalm 99 with a final call to worship that is full of significance –

*Exalt the LORD our God,  
and worship at his holy mountain;  
for the LORD our God is holy!*

### **Where is the Holy Mountain where we Worship?**

Where is the holy mountain where we are called to worship God? It's not Mount Sinai, where He gave the Law. It's the mountain where Jesus fulfilled the Law and vacated the Temple by dying for our sins, where He was buried close-by in a newly cut tomb, a tomb He then vacated three days later. We worship the LORD at Mount Calvary, at the cross and in the light of the empty tomb. We worship Him through the Savior who made atonement for our sins and who won eternal life for us and for all who come to God through Him.

Don't bother coming to God with your offers of what you will do for Him. God invites you to come trembling, empty-handed, and kneeling before His holiness as one who is made holy by the cleansing blood of Jesus alone. And as we come to God often and only through Jesus, He is making us more holy, shaping us into the likeness of the perfect Savior and righteous King who loves justice and who calls us to walk in His footsteps. In love, God shares His holiness with us, invites us to partake of His holiness, and sacrifices everything to enable us to enter into the beauty and glory of His holiness forever.