

# The Holy God

by Charles Ryrie

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*God's holiness is a unique and absolute attribute that sets Him apart from all else, and we can encounter Him through meeting Him at the mercy seat (Jesus Christ) and through prayer.*

**Duration:** 40:31

**Scripture:** Exodus 33:9, Deuteronomy 3:26-28, Psalm 99:7, John 15:7, Hebrews 4:16

**Topics:** "Obedience To God", "Holy Worship"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the story of Moses and his disobedience to God. Despite Moses' plea to enter the promised land, God tells him that he will not be able to cross the Jordan River. However, Moses is forgiven and his ministry continues as he is instructed to pass on his knowledge to Joshua. The speaker emphasizes the importance of detailed obedience to God's commands and the need to listen and follow His instructions. The sermon concludes with a call to worship and exalt God as holy.

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## Transcript

In the writing I have done, I've experienced contact with a number of different editors. That is, people who look over the manuscript and do some necessary things to it, to, for example, get it in proper form that suits the particular publisher, making decisions about what should be capitalized and what shouldn't, and all of those necessary things that editors very helpfully do to prepare a manuscript for publication. Sometimes that's all an editor will do.

Sometimes an editor will also delve into the content and make criticisms about the content. When you're a new author, this is always very threatening, aggravating, frustrating, humiliating, and all the rest of it, to think that your practically inerrant manuscript could even be subject to critique by somebody who himself has probably never written a book, but is just a good editor. But after a while you begin to appreciate the editor who not only prepares the form, but who also is looking at the content to see that you're saying it the best way and you haven't made some sort of blunder that will haunt you in later years.

On one project, I was assigned an editor unknown to me, who, as far as I know, was not even a Christian, but very knowledgeable, very demanding, and I learned a lot from him. He used to send his criticisms back to me on yellow, legal-sized paper, and before the project was finished, I had accumulated more pieces of those yellow, legal-sized pages than I would like to tell you. But I learned to listen to him, not only for what he said, but also for his precision.

He was a very precise man. I did finally meet him once for about 15 minutes, but that's all. And because of his precision, the use of words, the careful choice of words that he insisted on, I have, of course, become somewhat sensitive to that point as I listen to others.

We commonly make some very strange mistakes. We talk about, that's the most perfect thing I ever heard. That's really a very loose use of the English language.

Something isn't most perfect, it's either perfect or it isn't perfect. That's to imply that something is less perfect. Or another one in the same vein, I think that's the most unique sermon I ever heard, or the most unique person I've ever met, or the most unique television program I've ever seen.

Well, something really isn't the most unique. If it's unique, it is unique, because unique is something that isn't subject to comparison. It stands as an absolute.

And yet, of course, in our common speech, we do say those things and we understand what we mean. But strictly speaking, if something is unique, it is unique. And it's not more unique than something else.

It's not the most unique thing. To say it's unique is enough. It stands alone, separate, distinct from all others.

We talk about God in certain rather imprecise ways as well. He's the most wise being in all the universe. Now that's true, but that isn't the most precise way to say it.

And that isn't the way the Bible says it. When the Bible talks about God's wisdom, I don't know how many of these references you can turn to, because I want to list a few for a moment. But when the Bible talks about God's wisdom, it says, to God only wise, in the last verse of Paul's letter to the Romans.

He's not just more wise or the most wise. He is, in a very special, unique sense, he is only wise. He's the only wise being in all the universe.

Now, of course, we have wisdom, and it is proper to make some comparisons between beings that have certain degrees of wisdom, but there's a unique sense in which God is only wise. When our Lord was praying his great priestly prayer, he talked about God in John 17, verse 3, and he prayed that they may know thee the only true God. He's unique because he's the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.

Likewise, Paul, in a description of praise to God, in 1 Timothy, the last chapter, chapter 6, and verse 15, Paul says he's the only potentate, or only ruler, 1 Timothy 6.15. It's not just that he's a superior ruler to other rulers, but there's a certain sense in which God is the only ruler. And by comparison, if we may do that, all other rulers aren't rulers, so to speak, when they are related to God the only ruler. None of us is wise, so to speak, when we compare with God who is only wise.

Things that claim to be God are not God when compared with the only true God. And one other reference in the Revelation, John says in Revelation chapter 15, verse 4, Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? For thou only art holy. And while there are degrees of holiness that even creatures can have, there's a certain sense in which when we look at God, he alone is holy.

Thou alone art holy. Putting these ideas together from these scattered verses, it is an easy conclusion to arrive at that God is unique in the most absolute sense of that word. What does it mean to be holy? Well, I

don't know what your definition would be, but I'm a stickler for definitions.

I think people ought to have some concrete concept when they use words and too often in our Christian vocabulary we are rather sloppy about that. We use a lot of words we don't define, very basic words like love or like holy. What does it mean to be holy? Well, holiness actually means to be separate, to be apart, to be distinct.

Holy means sometimes in the Old Testament, the distinction between clean and unclean things, animals, food. And those that are clean and separate are holy. When holiness is exhorted of the believer, be holy as I am holy, God is saying be distinct, be separate, be different.

And when holiness is ascribed to God as it is in Revelation 15, thou alone art holy, then it means God is absolutely distinct, separate, from all that could be called common and certainly from all that could be called unclean. Holiness, however, is not just a separation from. It's also got a positive aspect to it, which is not so easy to define but perhaps easy to conceive of.

If you say to me, how are you? And I say, not bad, then that probably means that I don't have this, that or the other. I have the absence of those diseases or afflictions. Dr. Walter Wilson used to have a tract and I remember once making the mistake of saying to him, how are you? So he handed out this tract.

Maybe some of you saw it in your acquaintance with him. Doctor being a medical doctor in his case. He handed out this tract and it said, well, I don't have such and such and such and such.

I am all right in these areas and so on. Give all this long string of medical diagnoses. And this was his response to how are you? Well, fortunately, it was in a tract.

You didn't have to listen to it like you do with some people when you ask them that question. But nonetheless, if you say, how are you? And I say to you, not bad. That conveys the absence of some things.

If I say to you, if I felt any better, I'd think I was in heaven. That conveys something very positive, doesn't it? Holiness has those two sides also. God is not only holy because he's separate and distinct from all evil, but also because he is positively righteous.

I want you to turn this morning to see something about his holiness to the 99th Psalm, Psalm 99. If God is the only holy one, so separate, so unique, so distinct, so positively righteous, how in the world can I ever hope to have any encounter with him? Well, some people answer that question by saying, or at least practicing, reducing God to our level. And so the holiness, the separateness, the apartness, the distinctiveness of God disappears.

But that's a fair question. If God is holy, not in a relative sense, but in an absolute sense, then how can I ever hope to encounter him? So I'd like to title the message on this psalm, How to Encounter a Holy God. The Lord reigneth, let the people tremble.

He sitteth between the cherubims, let the earth be moved. The Lord is great in Zion, he is high above all the people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name, for he is holy.

The king's strength also loveth judgment. Thou dost establish equity, thou executest judgment and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt ye the Lord our God and worship at his footstool, for he is holy.

That's the first stanza of this two stanza psalm. And the first stanza focuses, whatever else it says, it focuses upon God, the holy one, the unique one, the one who is separate and apart, the holy one who is great in Zion, the holy one who is high above all the people, the holy one whose name is also terrible and holy, and the one who in his character loves judgment and righteousness and executes that in the world. But it focuses at the beginning of the stanza and the end of the stanza on a place.

Now I know the psalm has millennial previews in it of God reigning in the coming kingdom and establishing justice and righteousness in the millennial kingdom. I know it also has historic roots in the reign of God in the Old Testament time. But it seems to me that the stanza focuses on a place where the holy God, the unique, separate, apart God meets men.

Where people can encounter him. And maybe you have already run ahead of me and you see what that place is. It's described in verse 1 and it's described in verse 5. And it's the same place in both verses.

In verse 1 it's described in the phrase he sitteth between the cherubim. And in verse 5 the same place is described, his footstool, which was also the mercy seat on the ark in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Now perhaps the reference to his footstool in verse 5 is less clear.

I think we're more apt to understand easily the phrase in verse 1, he sits between the cherubims. We know what that's focusing on, what that's pointing back to. But when it says worship at his footstool, that may not be so clear.

So let me read to you a verse from 1 Chronicles 28. Then David the king stood upon his feet and said, Hear me, my brethren and my people. As for me, I had in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord and for the footstool of our God.

And it made ready for the building. The ark and the footstool. The ark and the lid of the ark.

The ark and the mercy seat. God sitteth between the cherubim. God, the unique, separate, apart, holy God, sat between the cherubim.

That's how people encountered him in Old Testament times. The lid of the ark, that is the mercy seat, which was covered by the cherubim, is described, as you know, in Exodus 25. It was a lid of a very small box.

It was about, quite four feet long. And that's, this pulpit is longer than that. And it was only a little over two feet deep and two feet high.

And this pulpit is, well, maybe the depth is about the same. So if you could imagine a box about this deep and about four feet, it would be about here, wouldn't it? Wide and only two feet tall. That's the size of the footstool where God and men met in Old Testament times.

But how important that place was. There I will meet with thee and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim, which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment under the children of Israel. It was the place where God spoke.

And, of course, on that great day of atonement, it was the place where sin was atoned for, for the people, for the priests, for the whole nation of Israel. How can we encounter a holy God? The first answer in the first stanza of the song is by meeting Him at the mercy seat. Now, of course, we live on the other side of

the cross and there's a big difference.

A big difference. We don't come to a small box to hear God speak. And we don't send a priest to that same small box, especially to the lid of it, to sprinkle blood, to atone for sin.

Living on this side of the cross, the Apostle Paul writes, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that's in Christ Jesus, whom God has set forth to be a mercy seat, a propitiation, a place where satisfaction is rendered to a holy God, for that's what propitiation means. Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation, a mercy seat, through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are passed through the forbearance of God. I'm, of course, reading Romans 3, 24 and 25.

How can we encounter a holy God? Living on this side of the cross, that God who is holy, perfect, just, who executes righteousness, that same God became incarnate, in flesh, incarnate, in flesh. Chili con carne, chili with meat. Carnival, time you say goodbye to meat for Lent.

Carnivorous animal, one that eats meat. Incarnation, in flesh, in a body. And then the God-man became himself now, the place of propitiation, the place of satisfaction, the mercy seat, sprinkled with His own blood, so that God could legitimately say that all who believe in Him are righteous in His sight.

To justify means to declare righteous. And when God declares a sinner righteous, this is not a fiction. It is not a compromise.

It is not God meeting halfway and the sinner taking some steps halfway. This is God saying something that is true. True because we are righteous in Jesus Christ, who Himself is the propitiation, the mercy seat, the place where the sacrifice was made.

So how do we encounter a holy God? First answer, we encounter Him between the chariot bed, at His footstool. We encounter Him in the person of Jesus Christ. But the psalm goes on.

And I'm reading now verse 6. Moses and Aaron, among his priests, and Samuel, among them that call upon his name, they called upon the Lord, and He answered them. He spoke unto them in the cloudy pillar, and they kept His testimonies and the ordinance that He gave them. Thou answerest them, O Lord our God, and Thou wast the God that forgave us them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions or their evil deeds.

Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His holy hill, for the Lord our God is holy. Now the shift is rather startling, isn't it? Suddenly, we've been looking at God, we've been thinking about the mercy seat, about the place of propitiation, about how God met men there and atoned for sin. Now suddenly, the whole thing shifts to an entirely different subject.

To Moses and Aaron and Samuel, praying and answering those prayers. Verse 6, He answered them. Verse 8, Thou answerest them.

The whole thing seems to shift. How do we encounter a holy God who is so separate, so unique, so apart, so righteous? The second answer is through prayer. Moses prayed.

Moses prayed on a number of crucial occasions. He prayed, as you remember, when he came down and found the people in an orgy, having made the golden calf and worse. God wanted to destroy the nation, raise up another one, and Moses prayed for them.

In fact, in Deuteronomy it says, Moses said, I prayed for Aaron also. He was in jeopardy. Not only for the people, but for Aaron as well.

His intercession, of course, saved the people. When the spies came back with the good and bad reports, and the people sided with the bad report, Moses again interceded and prayed. Once again, God spared the nation because of Moses' intercession.

Aaron was among his priests. We don't have many records of Aaron's praying to God. Perhaps the psalmist was thinking of the incident over the rebellion of Korah.

When that rebellion, they thought they should have all the rights that the priests had, that Moses himself had. So God punished them and 250 were slain. Then the people got all weepy and said, that isn't fair God, you shouldn't have punished those 250 people, they weren't so bad after all.

God said, I'm going to punish you too for saying that. Before Moses could alert Aaron to grab a censer and run in and make atonement, over 14,000 more people were slain. And undoubtedly there would have been more slain had Aaron not interceded on that occasion when God punished the people.

And Samuel, Samuel was among those who called on his name. Maybe the psalmist is thinking back to Samuel's farewell swan song with the nation, reminding them of their responsibilities before God in 1 Samuel 12. And to reinforce the seriousness of what he was saying to the nation, remember he said, is it not wheat harvest today? I will call to the Lord and he will send thunder and rain, that you may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which you've done in the sight of God in asking for a king.

Rain during the wheat harvest in the spring of the year was most uncommon. And so this thunderstorm that came was a sign that what Samuel was saying, they should pick up their ears and listen carefully. I had a friend who just two or three weeks ago made his first trip to Southern California.

And we assured him that the weather would be perfect and he would encounter no rain. That's all he encountered, rain. Now it never rains in Southern California in August, but it did this August.

It never rains in the spring in Palestine, but it did this day, not only this spring, but this day when Samuel was speaking. And then Samuel concludes what he has to say in a very famous verse, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you. Now it's wonderful to cite the great prayers of the past.

Moses, Aaron, Samuel. I'm not surprised they could encounter a holy God. What about poor me? Well, I get in, I get in through a preposition.

And if there's one important word in verse 6, repeated twice, it's this one, among. Moses and Aaron were among his priests. And Samuel among them that call on his name.

And you're among them too. You and I get in on it through that among. If it said Moses and Aaron and Samuel only were his priests, that excludes the rest of us.

But they were among his priests. We are his priests, all of us who are believers. So how do we encounter a holy God? First at the mercy seat, which for us is Jesus Christ, the propitiation for our sins.

And then at the throne of grace. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. They called, we call.

And he answers. Now there's a catch. And it's in verse 7. He's speaking to them in the cloudy pillar.

For when God gave Moses additional instructions. That's how he did it at the door of the tabernacle. And they kept his testimonies in the ordinance that he gave them.

Now answers them. Oh, Lord, our God. Psalm 99 7 is the Old Testament counterpart to John 15 7, which says, if you abide in me, my words abide in you.

You shall ask what you will and it shall be done unto you. And hereby shall you prove yourselves to be my disciples. The catch is.

If we follow his commandments, we pray according to his will. If his words abide enough, then we can ask what we will, because we'll ask according to his words, according to his will. Did you ever sign a power of attorney? Some of you probably have.

It can be limited. It can be over just one matter. Or it can be unlimited.

Or any gradation in between. Once I signed an unlimited, unrestricted power of attorney. And when I read it I thought, my, I'm giving this person the right to do anything.

And I was. But I trusted him. And I knew if there was a decision to make when I was out of the country, that he would make the decision according to his knowledge of me and my wishes.

In a sense, Christ gives us a power of attorney when we pray. But. Not to ask for anything that pops into our mind.

But to know him so well, through his word, and through fellowship. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, because you'll ask what he wills. He's spoken to them in the cloudy pillar.

They kept his testimonies in the ordinance that he gave them. And that's why he answered them. Thou answer'st them, O Lord our God.

Thou wast a forgiving God. But one who took vengeance on their evil deeds. Both sides of God are true.

God does forgive. And yet God cannot erase history. He can forgive sins and does.

But he cannot change the past. I think the prime example of that is Moses himself, the greatest intercessor incited in this psalm. Remember, of course, that Moses was restricted from going into the promised land because he did a really rather small thing.

A rather trivial mistake, I would say. He struck the rock instead of speaking to it. And why shouldn't he have struck the rock? Because he did it once before, at God's command.

And experience told him that was a good thing to do. What's the difference? Small matter, whether you strike it or speak to it, isn't it? Because he didn't obey God in the minutia. God said, you'll never lead the people into the land.

When Moses tells us about that in the third chapter of Deuteronomy, he says, I pray thee, let me go over and see the good land that's beyond Jordan and Lebanon. And the Lord was rough with me for your sakes and would not hear me. And the Lord said, that's enough.

Don't talk about it anymore. Speak no more unto me of this matter. Be still, Moses.

If this weren't Sunday morning, I'd say, shut up. That's really what God said to him. Be still.

No more. Get thee up into the top of Pisgah and lift up thine eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and ye behold it with your eyes, but thou shall not go over this Jordan. Was Moses forgiven? Yes.

Did Moses have to reap what he had sowed? Yes. Was Moses' ministry finished? No. In the next verse, I'm reading Deuteronomy 3.28. But charge Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him, for he shall go over before this people and he shall cause them to inherit the land which thou shalt see.

Did Moses have nothing to do because he had sinned fatally? Not at all. He had a ministry to do and it was now to instruct Joshua. What do you suppose was top of the curriculum when Moses instructed Joshua? Joshua, listen, I want to tell you something about God.

He expects detailed obedience. So you listen to him and if he says speak, speak. If he says strike, strike.

And if he says one, don't do the other. Take it from me, Joshua. And that was a rather important lesson for Joshua to learn.

Moses' ministry wasn't finished. But it was different. How do we encounter a holy God? First at the mercy seat.

The Old Testament where the cherubim were. The New Testament where Jesus Christ came and made propitiation. How do we encounter a holy God who is so unique and separate and positively righteous? At the throne of grace.

Because we, along with Moses and Aaron and Samuel and Daniel and Nehemiah and Ezra and Paul and James, camel knee James because he prayed so much his knees were hard. We are among his priests. So, exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy hill.

For the Lord our God is holy. Now I know I'm supposed to close in prayer and that's it. And this may just upset everything.

But I just think we ought to sing holy, holy, holy. Though that's a beginning hymn, today we're going to make it a closing hymn if you don't mind. It's number six in the book.

So, let's sing it together. We've got time, I think, to sing all four verses of this great hymn. Would you like to stand as we sing it? Number six.

Holy, holy, holy. Lord God almighty. Let's stand and sing it together.

Holy, holy, holy. Lord God almighty. Our Father, we so gladly acknowledge who thou art today.

Perfect, holy, righteous, true. The only God. And thankfully worship that thou hast revealed thyself in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

No Old Testament saint could have sung that hymn, Blessed Trinity. But we can. And sing it intelligently because we know the Savior.

We're indwelt by the Spirit. We have the privilege of access to thee in prayer. We thank thee for all that we have in Jesus Christ.

Meet our needs, we pray, as you know them perfectly. May your word be with us.

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