

The Holiness of God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Gen. 2:3; Job 42:5, 6; Luke 5:1–11; Luke 4:31–36; Isa. 6:1–3; Rev. 4:8, 9.*

Memory Text: “Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy” (*Psalms 99:9*).

Key Thought: Scripture gives much attention to God's holiness. What does this holiness tell us about what God is like and what it means to the plan of salvation?

One of the foundational assumptions of all biblical writers is that the God of heaven exists. God's existence is just a given, like an axiom in geometry.

Instead, we find within the 66 biblical books an extensive recounting of what God is like and how He relates to us as fallen beings whom He longs to redeem.

This week's lesson focuses on one aspect of God's nature that's foundational in Scripture: God's holiness. God is love, Yes. And, Yes, God bids us call Him “Father.” And, Yes, God is patient, forgiving, and caring.

But, according to Scripture, fundamental to our understanding of God is His holiness. Both in the Old and New Testaments, God's holiness undergirds His revelation of Himself. This theme appears all through the Scriptures in one way or another.

What, though, does it mean to say that God is holy? How does the Bible depict His holiness? And how do we, as unholy beings, relate to a God like this?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 4.*

“It Is Written”

Even a superficial study of church history makes it clear that it’s all too easy to develop ideas about God and then to worship these ideas instead of God Himself, the God revealed in the Bible. As the skeptic Voltaire quipped, “God made man in His image, and man has returned the compliment.” We may not even realize that we have an incomplete, or even false, understanding of God.

Thus, we must return to Scripture and compare our thinking about God with what is taught there. And this study must include both Testaments, for in both the Lord has spoken to us. This point is important because some have argued that the God revealed in the New Testament is different from the One revealed in the Old. That’s not a position accepted by Seventh-day Adventists, nor is it a position taught in the Bible.

What phrases punctuate the Old Testament prophets again and again? *Jer. 7:1–3.*

The prophetic messages of the Old Testament are laced thousands of times with the phrase, “thus says the LORD,” or an equivalent. This should remind us that the prophet is not merely speaking for God but that God is speaking for Himself through the prophet.

At the same time, the New Testament is filled with reference after reference to the Old Testament. In fact, the whole theology of the New Testament is intricately linked to the Old. How does one, for instance, make sense of the sacrifice of Jesus apart from the entire sacrificial system revealed in the Old Testament? How many times did Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, refer to Old Testament passages in order to buttress their arguments and points? The whole New Testament corpus finds its theological foundation in the Old. There’s no justification for any radical division between them. All Scripture—both Testaments—is inspired by the Lord (*2 Tim. 3:16*).

Look up the following texts. How do they help us to see the link between the New Testament and the Old? What do they tell us about how Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, viewed the Old Testament? *Matt. 4:4, 11:10; Mark 1:2; 7:6; John 12:14, 15; Acts 13:33; Rom. 3:10; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:16; 1 Cor. 5:7.*

Mark Twain once said that it’s not the parts of the Bible that he doesn’t understand that bother him; it’s the parts that he does. Who doesn’t, at times, find sections of the Bible bothersome? Given what the Bible says about itself (*2 Tim. 3:16*), how should we respond to the parts we don’t understand, or maybe don’t even like? (See also *1 Cor. 13:12*.)

To Be Set Apart

What is the first time the concept of “holiness” (from the same root often translated as “sanctified”) is mentioned in Scripture? *Gen. 2:3*. How significant is the fact that the first thing deemed holy in the Bible is time?

This text gives us our first understanding of holiness. It shows that something, in this case time, is “set apart” from that which is around it. The seventh day itself is no different from any other 24-hour, sunset-to-sunset period; what makes it different, “holy,” is that God declared it that way. He set it apart from the rest of the week.

The Hebrew word there for “sanctified” means to “make holy” or to “declare holy.” Holiness then implies that something is special about whatever is “holy,” something that sets it apart from what isn’t holy.

To some degree, then, this idea should help us to understand the holiness of God. God is set apart from anything else in creation. He is transcendentally separate, far above and beyond anything that we can truly grasp. To be holy is to be “other,” to be different in a special way, as with the seventh-day Sabbath.

How do these texts help us to understand the holiness of God in this context? *Exod. 15:11, 1 Sam. 2:2, Pss. 86:8–10, 99:1–3, Isa. 40:25*.

This concept of holiness should help us better understand the gap between a God who is holy and a race of beings who aren’t—a race, in fact, of sinners. God is separate from us not only because He is the Creator and we are the created but because we are fallen beings. All this should, ideally, help us better understand that which Christ has done for us.

Although we are made in the image of God, what are the ways in which we differ radically from Him? How do these differences help us to understand our need of a Savior? Make a list of those differences and bring them to class on Sabbath.

To Repent in Dust and Ashes

After enduring inhuman suffering at the hand of Satan, Job cries out: “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (*Job 42:5, 6*). What does this response tell us about God’s holiness in contrast to human sinfulness? How is the gospel being preached in Job’s reaction to what he experienced?

The prophet Ezekiel, whom God graciously sends to Israel (even though they are captive in Babylon as a result of their unfaithfulness), also experiences the awful presence of God. What happened? (*Ezek. 1:28*).

Jacob had to flee from home after deceiving his father, Isaac, and twin brother, Esau. What was Jacob’s response after his night vision of the ladder to heaven and of God speaking to him? (*Gen. 28:16, 17*).

While Israel remained encamped at Sinai, the Lord again descended in the cloud on the mountain and proclaimed Himself to Moses. How did Moses react? (*Exod. 34:8*).

Daniel, another prophet during the same Babylonian captivity of Israel, also received major visions from God while he served as a high government official.

Although repeatedly told that he was loved in heaven, how did Daniel react when given a vision of God? Why do you think he reacted as he did? (*Dan. 10:5–8*).

Even though these men were faithful, godly, and righteous—they were prophets, even!—their reactions to the presence of God were fear, trembling, and worship. No doubt that was because, among other things, they understood their own unworthiness and sinfulness in contrast to the holiness of God. In their own way, these passages hint at the need of a Savior, a Substitute, Someone to bridge the gap between a Holy God and fallen sinful creatures like ourselves. Thanks to the Lord, we have that bridge in Jesus.

Imagine yourself having a similar experience to one of these men mentioned above. How do you suppose you would react, and why?

Depart From Me!

In the Old Testament, we find a consistent record of human responses to a God who is holy. What about in the New? Some modern Christians argue that the Old Testament presents a primitive and outdated picture of God, a God who is harsh and very prone to anger. But when Jesus comes, He is now the God of grace and love. We know, of course, that this is a distorted view of the Bible and of the character of a God who does not change.

What do the New Testament writers teach us about God’s holiness? Read, for instance, Luke 5:1–11. How does this show the consistency between the Old and New Testaments regarding the holiness of God?

After these men toiled unsuccessfully all night as fishermen, Jesus provided a miraculous catch of fish for His hard-working disciples. When this occurred, one would think a normal human response would be thankfulness to Jesus for such extraordinary financial assistance. Peter’s response, though, was focused on something else. His reaction was much like those of the Old Testament characters who encountered the Lord.

“But Peter was unmindful now of boats or lading. This miracle, above any other he had ever witnessed, was to him a manifestation of divine power. In Jesus he saw One who held all nature under His control. The presence of divinity revealed his own unholiness. Love for his Master, shame for his own unbelief, gratitude for the condescension of Christ, above all, the sense of his uncleanness in the presence of infinite purity, overwhelmed him. While his companions were securing the contents of the net, Peter fell at the Saviour’s feet, exclaiming, ‘Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 246.

Why this reaction? It’s because we’re not in the Garden of Eden anymore, where Adam and Eve—before their fall into sin—welcomed the presence of God in the cool of the evening. This close communion dramatically changed immediately after the Fall, when the couple ran and hid. Not much has changed since then. Indeed, this reaction remains the consistent picture throughout Scripture. Whenever a human being truly encounters the living God, there is the initial horror of finally seeing the true depth of one’s own sinfulness.

When was the last time you got a really good look at your own sinful nature? A horrible sight, isn’t it? What’s your only hope, and why?

When Demons Speak

Read Luke 4:31–36. What testimony is given here about the holiness of Christ? What is significant about who gave that testimony, too? What lessons can we draw from this story about God’s holiness?

Demons, who are fallen angels, remember who Jesus really is, and even they—in their nastiness, hatefulness, and rebellion—are constrained to acknowledge Him and that He is holy. Notice, too, that they feared that He was going to destroy them. Why so fearful? It must be that, so full of sin, even demons fear before the presence of God’s holiness, somewhat in the same manner that sinful humans do.

In the last book of the Bible, John describes receiving a vision from God. Read Revelation 1:12–17. John, sometimes referred to as the apostle who had the greatest insight into the love of God, has the same response to his encounter with the Holy God as we saw in the Old Testament.

Moreover, a vision of how celestial beings worship God in the heavenly sanctuary yields a similar picture to what Isaiah depicted centuries earlier in a vision (*see Isa. 6:1–3*).

What did John hear the heavenly beings around the throne saying?
Rev. 4:8, 9.

Although God is love and all heavenly beings adore Him, we can see that, around the heavenly throne of God, the worship anthem is not “God is love, love, love.” Nor do the heavenly beings cry out, “God is good, good, good.” Instead, day and night these mighty beings exclaim, “Holy, holy, holy, LORD God Almighty.” Although all heaven is involved in the ministry of God’s love and salvation to this world, heavenly beings around the throne of God day and night praise the holiness of God. As sinless beings, they are awed by His holiness, but they don’t hide in fear of it, as do fallen beings.

In all of the human encounters of the divine as depicted in Scripture, one never finds a suggestion that God is frightening. What we see instead is that, in the piercing light of His holiness, human beings finally see themselves for who they really are. And that is scary. In Scripture, when people truly encounter the God of heaven, we find no hand clapping, backslapping, and lighthearted singing. Rather, there is abject personal repentance. All see and admit their personal guilt without any excuses and without reference to the faults of anyone else. How different our words, our lives, and our actions would be were we all to live with the constant sense not only of God’s presence but of His holiness, as well.

Further Study: As Christ stands before the trafficking crowd in the temple, “the confusion is hushed. The sound of traffic and bargaining has ceased. The silence becomes painful. A sense of awe overpowers the assembly. It is as if they were arraigned before the tribunal of God to answer for their deeds. Looking upon Christ, they behold divinity flash through the garb of humanity. The Majesty of heaven stands as the Judge will stand at the last day . . . with the same power to read the soul. His eye sweeps over the multitude, taking in every individual. His form seems to rise above them in commanding dignity, and a divine light illuminates His countenance. He speaks, and His clear, ringing voice—the same that upon Mount Sinai proclaimed the law that priests and rulers are transgressing—is heard echoing through the arches of the temple: ‘Take these things hence; make not My Father’s house an house of merchandise.’

“Slowly descending the steps, and raising the scourge of cords gathered up on entering the enclosure, He bids the bargaining company depart from the precincts of the temple. With a zeal and severity He has never before manifested, He overthrows the tables of the money-changers. . . . None presume to question His authority. . . . Jesus does not smite them with the whip of cords, but in His hand that simple scourge seems terrible as a flaming sword. Officers of the temple, speculating priests, brokers and cattle traders, with their sheep and oxen, rush from the place, with the one thought of escaping from the condemnation of His presence.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 158.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, go over your answer to Monday’s last question. What are the major differences between us and a holy God? What are ways in which some of those differences can be eradicated, if any?
- ❷ Given what we have looked at this week, why is it so much easier to see why self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, especially about one’s own spiritual state, are very dangerous deceptions?
- ❸ Think about someone you know who is “holy”; that is, who seems to be upright, honest, pure, and so forth; someone quite “set apart” from most people. How do you respond to the person? Does he or she make you feel good or bad, and why?

Summary: It might be much nicer to focus only on God’s love instead of His holiness, but that would be to distort the truth. We need to encounter God’s searing holiness until we tremble before Him. Understanding God’s holiness, and our sinfulness in contrast, is crucial to helping us to understand what the atonement is all about, why it is so desperately needed, and why it had to cost so much.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Psalms 99:9*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Compare and contrast the reactions of demons, fallen humanity, and unfallen angels to the holiness of God.

Feel: Discern, to the depths of his or her being, the differences between a holy and righteous God and the nature of fallen humanity.

Do: Worship daily at the feet of our awesome and holy God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: At the Awesome Gate of Heaven

A What are the reactions of those in Scripture who had seen God in vision or witnessed the divinity of Christ flashing through humanity?

B Why did they respond to the divine Presence in these ways?

II. Feel: In the Presence of a Holy God

A Why is it important to focus on how holy God is in order to sense what makes Him holy?

B How do we respond appropriately to God's holiness, as the angels before the throne do, when we are so full of sin?

III. Do: Worship at His Feet

A What can we do to daily keep before us the scriptural descriptions of God's throne and His holy Presence?

B While we may approach His throne confidently because of Christ's cleansing blood, how do we yet respond to His holiness with our bodies, minds, and souls in worship?

► **Summary:** God is so exalted that even the celestial beings who are continuously before the throne are constantly awestruck by His holy nature. How vital, then, and necessary, that we, as fallen beings, acknowledge His holiness and seek His cleansing blood and righteousness.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God’s righteousness sets Him far above us in purity, perfection, glory, and light, and we should honor His holiness.

Just for Teachers: Use visuals, if possible, to help your class to picture the stories of some of the sacred encounters mentioned in the Scriptures.

Opening Activity: Make rough drawings of the items below or ask someone to draw them for you. Or divide your class into groups and ask each group to act out one of the stories for the rest to guess: the number seven (*Gen. 2:2*); the ladder in Jacob’s dream with angels on it (*Gen. 28:10–19*); the throne and a burning coal touching Isaiah’s mouth (*Isa. 6:1–6*); the burning bush (*Exodus 3*); Nadab and Abihu’s censers (*Leviticus 10*); the cloud resting above the tabernacle in the wilderness (*Num. 9:15–20, Numbers 12*); a shining warrior such as appeared to Joshua (*Josh. 5:13–15*); a cart with the ark on it and a priest trying to steady the ark (*2 Sam. 6:1–7*); the ark in the temple of Baal with the idol in pieces before it (*1 Samuel 5, 6*).

Discuss the following: What stories do these pictures/charades bring to mind? What is common about these stories? How did the people in these stories know that these items or people were holy? What made these items holy? What were the reactions of the characters in the stories to the holy items (or people)? Why did God want to teach His people about holiness?

Consider This: Talk about some of the holy things we deal with today, such as the Lord’s Supper, marriage, the pulpit, the sanctuary, and the Bible. What makes them holy? In what ways do we relate to these items and circumstances differently from the ways in which we relate to that which is secular?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: What an honor to be able to take the time to consider God’s holy nature. This might be a good time to kneel in prayer again, asking God’s blessing on this special study.

Bible Commentary

I. Sacred Time and Relationships (Review Genesis 2:2, 3 and Exodus 20:8 with your class.)

Everything that God makes is good and is to be honored and respected, including our bodies. However, God made two things at Creation that He particularly blessed and made sacred. “Then marriage and the Sabbath had their origin, twin institutions for the glory of God in the benefit of humanity.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 341. The Creator Himself joined the hands of Adam and Eve and instituted the law of marriage whereby they became one. “That which the eternal Father Himself had pronounced good was the law of highest blessing and development for man.”—Page 341.

The Sabbath was essential for humanity, even before the Fall, and before work as we know it today became a part of our lives. Even in paradise, it was important for our first parents to lay aside their own interests and employments, wonderful as they were, and take special time to more fully contemplate that which God had made. This awakened their gratitude as they reflected on their Creator’s beauty, wisdom, and power, and acknowledged that all that they enjoyed came from His hand.

Being able to share their delight in the beautiful scenes of nature made Adam’s and Eve’s happiness perfect in a way that even the companionship of angels could not have done. (See Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 46.) Sabbath is a time when family and friends can strengthen their bonds of relationship while enjoying the things of God together.

Consider This: How did Christ honor the Sabbath? What kinds of activities did He make a special point of doing on the Sabbath? What is the significance of His final act of rest on the Sabbath?

II. Sacred Encounters (Review Genesis 28:10–19, Exodus 3, and Isaiah 6:1–6 with your class.)

On the second day of his flight from home, Jacob, feeling guilty, outcast, lonely, and despairing, wept as he pled for forgiveness and the assurance that he was not forsaken. He didn’t feel relief, or even confidence that God had heard him. But that night he dreamed that heaven was open to him, with a ladder bridging the gap, and angels ascending and descending. Although it took a lifetime to fully understand what God was showing him in this dream, he realized he had a Savior and a connection to heaven. This

wonderful revelation of God made such an impact that he marked the spot as sacred and named it Bethel, meaning the house of God.

Bethel became a special place to which God directed Jacob after his sons had demonstrated such cruelty and falsehood in the massacre of Shechem. Jacob was horrified and heartsick at their course of action and bowed down with worry about vengeance from the surrounding nations. However, as the family traveled to Bethel, Jacob recounted to his family the story of his first journey away from home and the dream that God had given him at Bethel. In the recounting, his own heart was softened and his children's hearts were touched by God's subduing power. They gave up their idols and earrings, and, by the time they arrived at Bethel, they were prepared to worship Him there. God renewed His covenant promise to Jacob at Bethel and changed his name to Israel (*Gen. 35:9–15*).

Other places where God encountered His people were not always marked, including the burning bush where God talked with Moses or the spot where God, as warrior, revealed Himself to Joshua. But they were sacred at the time, noted so by God, and Moses and Joshua were required to remove their shoes. Sacred encounters required other behaviors, such as strict cleanliness (at Mount Sinai, for example). Those encountering God bowed and hid their faces.

“Humility and reverence should characterize the deportment of all who come into the presence of God. In the name of Jesus we may come before Him with confidence, but we must not approach Him with the boldness of presumption, as though He were on a level with ourselves. . . . These should remember that they are in His sight whom seraphim adore, before whom angels veil their faces. God is greatly to be revered; all who truly realize His presence will bow in humility before Him, and, like Jacob beholding the vision of God, they will cry out, ‘How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 252.

Consider This: Of what other sacred encounters in the Scriptures are you reminded? What were the circumstances of these encounters?

III. Sacred Spaces and Things (*Review Leviticus 10, Genesis 9:15–10, Genesis 12.*)

Nadab and Abihu had gone up on the mountain with the 70 elders and had witnessed God's glory in a special way. They had just finished helping their father, Aaron, and Moses dedicate the tabernacle, and they, too, had gone through a special cleansing and dedication service as priests. God's holy presence was evident at the tabernacle in the cloud of fire. But because their

father had been yielding, not requiring respect for his authority, they had not learned to respect and honor the exact requirements of God. Although they knew that worship in the tabernacle required careful and solemn preparation, they were partially intoxicated. This dulled their moral perceptions, and they failed to see the difference between what was sacred and what was secular.

Judgment came swiftly, in full view of the congregation. God told Moses to tell Aaron not to show grief. Even though the father realized that, to a large degree, his sons' sins were a result of his own neglect of duty, and even though his heart was torn in anguish, he could not sympathize with sin or lead the people to murmur against God's judgment.

Consider This: See *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 704–711, for further study.

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Discuss these questions in order to help your class members to make a personal application of the lesson.

Application Questions:

- ❶ What preparations are necessary in order to help you not only to keep the hours of Sabbath holy but to take special care with the edges of the Sabbath, the entering and exiting hours?
- ❷ What things can you as a class do to create a more sacred atmosphere for your worship services at church, as well as for family and personal devotions?

► **STEP 4**—Create

Just for Teachers: Suggest the following activity: Plan some special meals and activities with your family and friends for the coming Sabbath. Perhaps make some long-term plans with your family for the next few months of Sabbaths. Or honor your marriage in the next week by creating a special date night.