

# 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?

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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*.

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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 what 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?

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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 is 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*).

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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?

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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?

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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.*

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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:

- ① 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?
- ② 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?
- ③ 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.

## Through the Children

How does a group of believers carry on its ministry when they have no place to meet outside of their worship hour? The Portuguese-speaking group of believers in Brussels, Belgium, is small, but growing. It started as a Global Mission project, and it's growing larger and stronger as it reaches out to the Portuguese-speaking community in this multiethnic city in northern Europe.

Because the group doesn't have a church of its own, members can't hold meetings whenever they wish. Brazilians love to sing, and the youth crave a time to hold youth meetings, but without space and time, it's difficult to hold regular meetings.

The church members have discovered that ministries to children bring adults to the church. They've held weekend camps for children and youth in rented locations and have started an Adventurers Club. Because the church doesn't have enough Pathfinder-age children to form a club, leaders have asked the older children to help lead in Adventurers. And the club has quickly grown to 18 children, half of whom are from non-Adventist homes.

One boy who comes is nine-year-old Paul. His father swore that he would never set foot inside a church, so Paul's uncle brought Paul to Adventurers. Paul's mother began coming with the boy to watch the program and to see what Paul was learning. She praised the leaders for the strong values they were helping to instill in her son.

But Paul's mother couldn't attend Adventurers on the week of Paul's investiture. This was an important program, so Paul's mother asked her husband to take the boy. In spite of his promise never to go to a church, Paul's father attended the investiture program. He, too, was impressed with what his son was learning, and now he takes Paul to Adventurers often. He did not object when Paul's mother began taking Bible studies with a member of the church.

One day Paul's father commented, "I still don't believe, but what you're doing for my son and other children is a good thing. You are teaching good values."

God is working in the hearts of parents through the lives of their children in Brussels, Belgium. And our mission offerings are helping to make this possible. A recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is helping to provide worship centers for the Spanish and Romanian congregations in Brussels. Giving these two groups their own churches has made it possible for the Portuguese and another language group to meet in the rented spaces these two churches once used. Thank you for helping God's work expand in Brussels, Belgium, a city with many hungry hearts.