

Worship & the Holiness of God

Today we will begin a new mini-series on Worship. We will have five sermons on topics related to Worship. Today's sermon and topic is titled "Worship and the Holiness of God." And so what I'd like us to think about today is how God's holiness is related to our worship.

And so today I've selected Exodus chapter 3 for us to reflect on in terms of worship in general, and the holiness of God specifically. This is obviously a great chapter. This is one of the best chapters in the whole Bible, in terms of dramatic turning points in Scripture. Here the people of God had become enslaved by the Egyptians and God would initiate in this chapter a divine rescue plan. This very rescue plan which would lead the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land through Moses. This would become a foundational event for the Israelites. Their God, was the God that brought them out of Egypt by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And this would become a foundational picture for all God's people, not just ethnic Jews. For it would become a picture of what Christ would do in saving us from our sins and bringing us into eternal life. And so there is a lot here in this passage, more than what we'll be able to analyze just today. But what I'd like us to especially focus in on is how this passage informs our worship of God in light of God's holiness.

And so let's begin first then by defining the word "holy." This can be a hard thing to do; it's such an exalted concept. In one sense to be holy, is to be set apart; distinct. There is only one God, there is no other; no one like him. He himself is chiefly holy. He's the transcendent God who created all things, and is himself distinct from his creation. God is *not* the creation, as pantheism would lead you to believe. He is holy, holy, holy, which gets at his glorious majesty that says that he alone is God. But another way we often think about God's holiness is in terms of his purity and cleanness. There is no spot of evil in God. All his actions are completely pure and morally upright. And so for God to be holy means both these things: that he's set apart, and that he is morally pure. But really these are closely related ideas. God is set apart in his glory and majesty, as the only one who is God. And he is set apart in his purity, completely unstained by sin. Both the Hebrew and Greek words in Scripture bring out this notion.

And yet amazingly in Scripture, the word "holy" often get applied to things other than God. In our passage for today, for example, we have *holy* ground. God's people in both the Old and New Testaments are frequently referred to as "saints." Well the word "saints" is actually most literally translated as "holy ones." God's people are the "holy ones," and it's the same word for holy that's used to describe God's holiness. And the saints, the holy ones, are commanded by God in the Bible about various things that they should and shouldn't do in keeping with their holy status. Of course what makes places and people and actions holy or not is ultimately their relationship with God. It's God's intrusion of his presence into certain places that makes a place holy. It's God's special relationship that he forms with certain people that makes them a holy people. And so when the word "holy" is used to describe certain people and places and actions, it's because these things have been brought into a special relationship with God in a way that's distinct from how the rest of creation is relating to God. It's recognizing a special position of the person or place with God. When we use the word "holy" in

that sense, the opposite of the word would be "common" or maybe just even the word "ordinary."

And so with that explanation of the word holy, let's dig into this passage a little more. Hopefully the word "holy" will become more clear even as we study this passage. Let's begin in verse 1. Here you have Moses going about his ordinary, everyday work as a shepherd. There's nothing uniquely holy about his work or his actions or the place that he's in. But then he comes to Mt. Horeb. Verse 1 tells us that this is mountain of God. That's obviously information given for our sake. Moses at the time didn't realize this was any special place. And by the way, Mt. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai, the place where God would later bring the Israelites to; the place where he would give Moses the Ten Commandments, and make a covenant with the people. That's what verse 1 I think has in mind when it describes this as the mountain of God. This was a place God had chose to dramatically intrude into Moses' life, and where he would also later meet the Israelites at.

But here what initially grabs Moses attention is the burning bush. Moses is busy taking care of his flock when he notices a great sight, according to verse 2. The text describes it with a bit of surprise. "He looked, and behold," he notices the bush. And so what does Moses do? He goes to check it out, verse 3. What caught Moses attention is that this was a miracle. There was a fire coming from the bush, but the bush wasn't getting burnt up. That's not normal! And so Moses goes over to check it out. Moses hadn't realized yet that it was the Angel of the LORD, a manifestation of God, revealing himself right here to Moses! And so Moses goes traipsing over to the bush to find out what's going on. This is just a very innocent action by Moses. He wanted to go check out this amazing bush.

But then the situation changes. Verse 4. God calls to Moses from the bush. The Hebrew is very specific here. God's voice comes from the very same place that the fire was coming from in the bush. The text relates God with the fire that is overwhelming the bush, but not consuming it. God calls, "Moses, Moses!" Moses answers, "Here I am."

And here God announces his holiness. Don't come any closer, he says. Moses had innocently started heading over to the bush as if he was in control and fit to check out this wonderful thing. But God says to stop. Don't come any closer. Instead take off your sandals for you are on holy ground. Moses is no longer on ordinary ground. And that burning bush was no ordinary burning bush. The fire was a manifestation of God. This is what we call "theophany." A theophany is an appearance or manifestation of God in some physical way on earth. Here, God presents himself to Moses on earth in the burning bush. And when God does that, God's holiness transforms that place to a holy place. It was as if God's abode was temporarily at that place, on that mountain.

And of course, what did you do when you came into someone's home back then? You take off your shoes. Shoes would get very dirty back then, I'm sure especially if you were a shepherd. And it wasn't so easy to clean floors and homes back then. So when you'd go into someone's home or tent, you'd remove your shoes and wash your feet. That's what Abraham had did for God, when God appeared to him as a traveler back in Genesis 18:4. That was another theophany, that time God appeared in the form of a human traveler. Abraham showed hospitality to God and called him to come and rest, and let his feet be washed. Well, here Moses had unknowingly traipsed into God's place, so to speak. It was to be an act of reverence then to remove his dirty shoes in a place that had become holy, pure and clean, because God was there.

God goes on to identify himself to Moses in verse 6. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He's the God of the patriarchs. What's the significance of this? Well God had made very specific promises to these three patriarchs. He had promised to them to make their offspring into a great nation and to give them the Promised Land of Canaan as an inheritance. Well, by now, the Israelites had become a very large people. But they did not possess the Promised Land. In fact, their situation was quite the opposite. They were slaves in Egypt. They were suffering. They were in pain. That's how the previous chapter in Exodus ended. The people cried out to God because of their suffering. And it said in chapter 2, verse 24, that God heard their cry; and he remembered his covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And so God was a God of compassion, and a God of promise. God would certainly keep his promise that he made. By this announcement to Moses, God was telling Moses that he had come to keep his promise.

But here Moses finally recognizes the situation. This is God. And the God of his fathers. Thus, without question, *his* God. How foolish, in hind sight, Moses must have realized his actions were; traipsing over to somehow inspect this mystery of the burning bush. Notice instead how Moses actions instantly change here. The last part of verse 6: he hides his face, afraid to look upon God. Moses had been confronted with the holy, and it instantly changed his approach. One moment he's boldly going to check out this burning bush, the next moment, he's removing his sandals and humbly covering his eyes. He has a proper fear of Holy God who had transformed that place into holy ground. And so he responds with the appropriate reverence. When the ordinary and common become holy, Moses' actions change accordingly.

So God then begins to tell Moses why he's revealing himself. That's what the remaining verses describe here. Look at verse 6. God sees, he hears, and he knows. God saw the oppression of Jews. He heard their cries. He knows their sorrows. And notice how God refers to the Jews. He calls them "my people." *My* people. These people have a special relationship to God because of the covenant God had made with their forefathers. They are in a special relationship to the holy God. And so God saw their plight, he heard their plight, and he knew their plight. What would he do? Verse 8. He was already doing it. Verse 8 says, "So, I have come down to deliver them." God, the Holy God, for whom the heavens are his abode, this holy one set apart from all the creation, he has come down. He had come down right then and there in the burning bush. He had come down to appear to Moses. He had come to bring deliverance. Salvation. Salvation from slavery. And he would bring the people into the Promised Land just as he had promised long ago.

But guess what Moses, there's more! God repeats the plight of the people in verse 9. Why? Just to be repetitive? No. God repeats their plight to tell Moses the way he is going to bring about their deliverance. The Holy God would deliver them *through* Moses. Moses must have thought, "Excuse me? What did you just say?" By the way, God calls the people, "My people," again in verse 10. But Moses says, "Who am I?" Remember Moses had become very humble before God when he realized that it was God speaking to him from the bush. This question expresses similar humility. Moses asks who am I, that he should do such a great thing? Well God answers him in verse 12. Basically God says, "No one. You're right Moses, you aren't anyone to be able to do this." Surely Moses and God both knew what happened before when Moses tried to do things on his own. In the previous chapter, Moses had tried to stand up for the Jews when an Egyptian was beating a Jew and so Moses killed the Egyptian. But the Jews didn't seem to appreciate his action. Some of the Jews the next day spoke out against Moses saying, "Who made you a prince and judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" And when the Pharaoh of Egypt heard about Moses killing the Egyptian he basically put a warrant out for his arrest. That had caused Moses to secretly flee from Egypt to the land

of Midian. And so Moses' attempt on his own to be a leader among his people and to help deliver his people from suffering just landed Moses in trouble. Who was Moses to accomplish such a great mission? But God says in verse 12 that it wasn't about Moses. It was about God. God would be with Moses. The Holy God who is seen here as the fire in the burning bush. That fire would come upon Moses. God would be with Moses, he would go with him, but would not consume him. Instead he would use him. God would speak through Moses, even as God spoke through the burning bush.

And verse 12 tells us a sign of how the people would know that God had been with Moses, and that God had sent Moses. God would use Moses to bring the people out of Egypt to this very mountain. On this very mountain, this place God had called holy ground, the people would serve God here. This word "serve" here is used in the sense of worship. Moses would bring the people out of Egyptian slavery here to worship God. Verse 18, later in this chapter, talks about that worship when it talks about the people making sacrifices to God in the wilderness. And so when this happens, then it will be a sign that God really had sent Moses. God would bring his people to worship at this holy place. God is predicting it ahead of time, so that when it comes to pass, everyone would know that it came from God.

Well we know from Israel's history that it did come to pass. I hope you are reminded today how beautiful of a picture this is. This is a picture of the gospel. What God did with the Hebrew people through Moses is a picture of what he would do through Jesus for all God's people. Let me paint the picture for you. God uses Moses as instrument to deliver God's people, from bondage and suffering, from the Egyptians, to bring them to worship and serve God, and ultimately to bring them into a wonderful inheritance, for them the Promised Land. Well, that's what God does through Jesus for all God's people. God the Father uses Jesus to deliver God's people from bondage and suffering, from the effects of sin and Satan, to bring them to worship and serve God, and ultimately to bring them into a wonderful inheritance, eternity in heaven with God. The Egyptian bondage is a picture of how we are spiritually in bondage to sin and Satan. The Promised Land is a picture of how God would give his people an eternal inheritance of heaven with him. God's delivering the people through Moses was a picture of how God would send an anointed one, Jesus Christ, to be the means of deliverance. And so the story of Israel's exodus became foundational for explaining God's relationship with the nation of Israel. And it becomes foundational for all who are truly God's people, both Jew and Gentile, who have been freed from the slavery of sin by the work of Jesus Christ. The exodus for us is foundational in a typological sense. It's a beautiful picture beforehand of how God would give us the sort of deliverance we really need. And as much as God foretold to Moses ahead of time how this would happen, to be a sign that it was God's doing, how much more has God not told us ahead of time everything that Jesus would do in saving his people! This too is a sign of God sending Jesus, and God having worked all of our salvation in Jesus ahead of time!

But there's more good news. When Moses died, he died and went to heaven. The people were left without the holy messenger of God. God did appoint a new leader, Joshua, who for a time led the people. But eventually he died and went to heaven. God rose up other leaders from time to time and put his Spirit upon them. But when Jesus left this earth, ascending up into heaven after the resurrection, he promised to send his Holy Spirit upon all flesh. That happened at Pentecost. At Pentecost God poured out his Holy Spirit on the church. And when that first happened, God visually represented this event with tongues of fire coming and resting on the believers. And then what did those believers do? They served God and they worshipped him.

In other words, think about how Pentecost brings this burning bush passage back home for us as Christians. The Holy Spirit now lives inside us as Christians. The Holy Spirit which is pictured as a flaming fire is what is inside us. It's essentially the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives that makes us a holy people. That's why the New Testament refers to us as saints, as holy ones. The Holy Spirit makes us holy. As much as God was present in that burning bush as a fire that did not consume the plant, God is now present in our hearts as a fire that does not consume us. And as God's presence in the bush made that ground holy ground, we now have been made a holy people by God's presence inside us. And as God's holiness and presence called his people to worship him back then at Mount Horeb, we now as Christians are called to worship God. You see, we too have been made a part of God's people. We are *his* people. We too are called to worship him.

And so I'd like to stop here with our exposition of this passage and spend the remainder of our time applying this passage in terms of worship. Specifically, I'd like to identify four things we learn about our worship from this passage, especially in light of the holiness of God. The first thing is that our worship is holy. Our worship is holy. That might go without saying, since we are worshipping the holy God. But let's think a little further about. Back then, Moses was at a holy place. He would later bring God's people to worship at that holy place. Eventually God's people would worship in the holy city of Jerusalem in the temple. Their worship could certainly be called holy. But we don't worship in a place geographically designated as a holy place. We don't worship on Mt. Horeb or in Jerusalem. How can we worship God now in any place, and still have it be a holy worship?

Well, what makes something a holy place? In our passage for today, it was God's presence. God's presence in coming down in a special way through the burning bush transformed an ordinary place to a holy place. And so it's God's presence that makes a place holy. And so when Jesus was asked by the Samaritan woman if we should worship in Jerusalem or in their holy place in Bethel, what was Jesus' answer? He said that the "hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth" (John 4:23). When believers gather together to worship, the Lord is with us spiritually. The Holy Spirit lives inside us. God's presence is among us. And so our worship is holy. The Holy God is present with us when we worship. That makes our worship holy. Though we live our regular, common, ordinary, everyday lives in this world, when we come together to worship God, it's to remove ourselves from the everyday world and to meet the all holy God who is present among us. Our worship is a holy convocation.

My second point about worship is a complement to this. Not only is our worship holy, our worship is reverent. Our worship is reverent. Because our worship is holy and we worship the holy God, it demands that we have reverence in our worship. Reverence in the bible is essentially righteous fear of the holy God. And so because our worship is a holy encounter with the holy God, we reverently come before him. This is what happens for Moses. When he realizes that it was God who spoke from the bush, he becomes afraid and his whole attitude changes. This is an expression of reverence - a biblical fear of the holy God. For Moses, God's holy presence was there on Mt. Horeb in a very physical way, and so for Moses his reverence was expressed in a very physical way. He removed his shoes and he covered his face. These were expressions of reverence in the face of a physical manifestation of God. We too must respond with reverence in the equivalent spiritual way. If God is spiritually present with us, how can we express our spiritual reverence in the service?

Well there's certainly a number of ways we can express this, and there is certainly some freedom on how we can express this. The principle is that we should reverently come before God in worship. How is our church leadership looking to have us express that principle? Well, let me point out a few ways. One, we try to set the tone before we actually officially start our service. We've asked that when the prelude begins, that we all sit down and begin to pray and meditate silently in our seats. In other words, we're trying to set the tone for our worship service as being reverent by asking that we each personally prepare for the start of the service. Then you notice that the actual worship service is set out very formally. The service starts and ends with an official blessing, we call that the salutation to start, and the benediction when we end. This also is trying to set a reverent tone. And then throughout the service, we try to continue that reverence in all that we do. Personally, for me, that means I try not make excessive jokes, for example, when I'm up here.

You know a number of people have pointed out to me that I'm a bit of a different person when I'm up here leading the service and preaching, than I am when you speak with me one-on-one. Now part of that I'd like to improve upon. God calls men to be pastors and he calls them with their unique personalities. And I certainly am striving to bring my own personality to this pulpit, and less of what I think is expected of me. But I think the bulk of why people see a different me up here, is actually because of my desire and conviction that this be a reverent worship service. When you and I have a conversation, I might seem more jovial and light-hearted for a reason. Because you and I are having a conversation. We are not engaged in a holy convocation where we are worshipping God. This worship service is holy, and so it demands that we have reverence in our worship. By God's grace, I endeavor to lead us in that holy effort.

My third point about our worship is that it is a divine gathering. A divine gathering. What I mean when I say "gathering" is that it's a summons. We are summoned by God, we are called by God, we are gathered by God, to worship him. Here in Exodus we see God tell Moses that a sign of divine success would be Moses bringing the people back to that holy mountain to worship God. God was calling the people to worship! In fact, that's part of what this chapter goes on to say. God will instruct Moses to pass this message on to Pharaoh, the Egyptian King - that part of why Pharaoh was to let God's people go, was to have the people go worship God in the wilderness. God called his people back then to worship him. God continues to call his people to worship him. We are his people. He has summoned us to worship him. He particularly calls us to set aside one day out of seven as holy. A day to worship God. The New Testament church now does that on Sunday, the Lord's Day. We set aside that day for the public and private worship of God.

And so this means a few things. It's means we are formally called by God to worship, and so that is why at the start of the service we have a formal Call To Worship. It's a reminder of what God is calling his people to do. This also means that we need to be here. That's why Scripture tells us not to neglect meeting together (Heb 10:25). And this means that this formal worship service is a collective thing, not an individual thing. Don't get me wrong, there's a time and a place for individuals and families to worship God. And doing that on the Lord's Day is a great time for that. But when we assemble together as the local church to worship God, it's in response to his divine summons. He calls us and gathers us to come together and worship him as his people. When we do that, it's a corporate, collective, thing.

My fourth and final point about worship is a complement to this third point. Not only is our worship a divine gathering, but it's a gathering of the saints. Worship is a gathering of the saints. It's a gathering of the holy ones of God.

Of God's people. In our passage, who was God bringing out of Egypt? Who was he leading out to have worship him at Mt. Horeb? *His* people. *His* people. The Jews were called holy ones, because they were God's special people. We too, if we belong to Christ are God's people. That's what Peter told the New Testament church in 1 Peter 2:9, that we are a holy nation; God's own people. God called *his* people to come worship him at Mt. Sinai. He continues to demand worship from his people. And we are his people if we belong to Christ. Really, only God's people can truly worship him, because only his people can truly come in Spirit and in truth. Only we have been made holy so that we can approach the holy one. Only we have been given his Holy Spirit. When we become a Christian, there's a transformation that goes on. We become a holy one. We are then called to worship God along with the other saints.

What this means, practically speaking, is that our corporate worship service is geared first and foremost for Christians, for believers, for the saints. This corporate worship service is a gathering of God's people to worship God. That means that worship is first and foremost. Edification and discipleship of the saints is first and foremost. Evangelism to seekers is second.

And so many churches today proclaim they are seeker sensitive. Now I don't have a problem with the phrase itself. I do hope that our service can be sensitive to seekers. But what many churches mean by that is that their worship service is primarily geared for the non-believer. The real growth and discipleship happens in such churches in small groups and in other settings. The Sunday morning worship service for those churches actually becomes an evangelistic crusade.

But at our church, we see the Lord's Day Worship service as first and foremost a gathering of the saints to worship. And so I seek to tailor the service and sermon first and foremost to the saints. I routinely address you as saints of God, for example. Now there may certainly be non-Christians that are here during the Worship service. When I address the saints, I'm not *technically* speaking to them. I do occasionally address the unbelievers in our service. But I believe that this approach can certainly be used to reach out to unbelievers at the same time. You see, if you are an unbeliever witnessing what's going on in our service, I hope you see a contrast. I hope the unbeliever realizes that they are sort of on the outside looking in. That they are outsiders to the church. But the church, and Jesus, is calling the person to become an insider. To join the church. To become a saint, by faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. To join with God's people in gathering together each week to worship God. And so I think our worship service can and does indirectly serve to evangelize to the unbeliever. Of course, I think it is also quite fitting to find other opportunities as well to specifically hold services and meetings to evangelize to non-believers, outside of the normal Sunday Morning Worship service. That could come in the form of crusades, special investigative bible studies, church open houses, etc. But it's our conviction that the official Lord's Day Worship service is first and foremost a gathering of the *saints* to worship God.

And so saints of God, holy ones of God, I hope you've been encouraged today that that things we do in worship at our church, are seeking to be faithful to the pattern and teachings of Scripture. We worship a holy God, but that holy God has reached down to us. He has made us his holy people because of Christ who delivered us from death and brought us to eternal life. And this holy God not only calls us to worship him in holiness and reverence as his people, but he delights in our worship. Praise be to him. Amen.