

# The God Who Is Holy

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 09 November 2014

Preacher: Dr. Phil Long

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, it is a delight to be here again. I always value an opportunity to preach at St. John's because I have a high respect for St. John's respect for the Word of God, and not just for the 23% at the end of the Word of God, which we call the New Testament, but for the entirety of the Bible.

And I have to say that because I teach Old Testament. Because I believe that to the extent we truncate our reading of God's Word to us, we truncate our understanding of who He in fact is. And so I'm delighted to be here, to be a part of this series on the somewhat wild and wonderful and sometimes jarring book of Ezekiel. But it's challenging to sort of parachute in, particularly when they assign to you the chapter that you must deal with.

Now, I highly suspect they chose Ezekiel 20 for Synod Week so that they wouldn't have to deal with it. It is challenging. You just heard it read.

It was a long passage. I hope you were able to stay with it and listen to it. But it's a puzzling passage in a number of ways. The people come to inquire of God, and God won't let them.

[ 1 : 16 ] Instead, He launches into a lengthy rehearsal of their history of rebellion, a history that has Him repeatedly contemplating simply wiping them out.

And the main reason He doesn't, apparently, is His own reputation, His name, His character, who He is, and His concern that His name not be besmirched by the watching world.

There's even a verse in this most interesting chapter, in verse 25, which says that God gave His people statutes that were not good and laws by which they could not live.

Now, I'm not sure that I would have chosen this particular chapter if I had been given a choice, but I wasn't. I probably would have chosen something like my good colleague Ross Hastings had last week.

Ezekiel 37, the Valley of the Dry Bones. There's even a song about that one. But I got this one. And I must say, I'm glad I did. It was tough.

[ 2 : 24 ] And another reason that it was tough is that for the first time in the book of Ezekiel, holiness and a holy God is expressly mentioned. Now, he's all over the book, but this is the first time those two words occur.

And it's all about the holiness of God. Now, your series is looking at the character of God, and so my assigned title is The God Who is Holy. Well, I don't know whether it's a good idea to set up lists of favorite divine attributes.

It's probably not a good idea. But if I were to compile such a list, I'm not sure where holiness would fall. I think I would probably begin with love and mercy and compassion and patience and God's beauty.

But holiness, you know, if even the great prophet Isaiah in the presence of God's holiness felt undone, well, then it's not surprising that we feel a little uncomfortable when we think of a holy and righteous God because we know ourselves.

So at first glance, this chapter, Ezekiel 20, might not seem the best material for an encouraging and edifying sermon.

[ 3 : 40 ] However, one thing I've learned having studied the Bible for a number of years now is when a text puzzles you, when it troubles you, that's precisely not the time to look away.

That's the time to look closer. And so what I hope we'll do today is to look closer at Ezekiel chapter 20 that focuses on a holy God.

And I hope that we'll discover, I believe that we'll discover, that God is indeed holy and that this is good. That he cares deeply for his people and he won't give up on them.

So, I'll not pretend to do justice to the topic of holiness. I mean, it took Dr. Packer an entire book, Rediscovering Holiness, to address the topic.

So I'm not going to try to do that in 30 minutes. But let me, I shouldn't have told you how long I'm going to take. But let me say three things by way of orientation.

[ 4 : 38 ] First of all, holiness is not a posture that God assumes. It's who he is. It's at the core of his being. He can't abandon it.

God is holy in himself. And we grow in holiness as we grow in God. The second thing is that holiness has a lot to do with wholeness.

Holiness, it involves everything that's right and nothing that's wrong. I've heard holiness referred to as the symmetry of the soul. Everything in balance.

Everything as it should be. And I know it's trivial to think of a Nissan X-Terra SUV ad at this point. But I'm reminded of their slogan which says, Everything you need, nothing you don't.

That's what holiness is. That's who God is. Everything we need, nothing we don't. And he wants our lives to begin to reflect that. Everything we need and nothing we don't.

[ 5 : 41 ] Now, a third thing is God's holiness is expressed in concert with his other attributes. This means that, for example, God's holiness is loving and his love is holy.

Now, Ezekiel 20 shows us this holiness of God in action. So, if you've been following the series so far, you'll probably know that the book of Ezekiel can be divided into three major parts.

First part runs from chapter 1 to 24. And it deals mainly with judgment, pronouncements of judgment against Israel, God's people. Then the next section, 25 to 32, deals with judgment against the surrounding nations.

And only when we come to 33 and following to the end in 48 do we begin to hear overt oracles of salvation, hope, restoration.

Now, furthermore, Ezekiel 20 begins a little short subunit that Fee and Stuart entitled Countdown to Catastrophe.

[ 6 : 52 ] You see why they ran off to synod and gave me this chapter? Countdown to Catastrophe. That catastrophe was the fall of Jerusalem and it's alluded to in chapter 24.

But I want to suggest that even in this dark section, we glimpse hope. We find glimpses of hope if we will but look closer.

So, that's what I want us to do. And as we look closer, I want us to notice four things about a holy God who cares for his people, cares deeply for his people.

I want us to notice, first of all, that he cares enough to confront them. He also cares enough to communicate with them. He cares enough to contend for them even when they want to give up on themselves.

And he also cares enough to complete the job and bring them home. This is the holy God. So, let's look first at the very beginning of the chapter where we have that first puzzle.

[ 7 : 54 ] The elders come to inquire of the Lord and he says, I'm not having that. Now, that's surprising because I would have thought that inquiring of God was something that we should do.

After all, Joshua in the book of Joshua was criticized for failing to inquire of God. So, something more must be going on. You know, when you're having a conversation with someone, if you ask them a question and they don't respond, it's a pretty good idea to ask a follow-up question.

Like, why didn't you answer me? But be prepared for a confrontation because often that's what's going on. So, we're not told here what kind of inquiry this is, but we can perhaps speculate.

Perhaps we can guess. Remember the people, Ezekiel and some of the people of Israel are already in Babylon. Now, Jerusalem has not yet fallen, but they're already in Babylon and they're in a bad way.

And they're looking for some change in their circumstances. And perhaps they view the sort of resurgence of Egypt and its re-interest in the land of Israel as perhaps promising some way of pushing back Babylonian power.

[ 9 : 06 ] And maybe they'll get to return to the land of Israel sooner rather than later. But it was bad. Now, Polly, my wife, was with our little granddaughter, Hazel, a few weeks ago.

And Hazel's five, started kindergarten this year. And so, Polly, as a good little grandmother, took her up on her lap and said, Hazel, how's kindergarten? And Hazel furrowed her brow and sort of stared blankly into space and said, About as bad as it could be.

And Polly said, what? And she said, about as bad as it could be. Her sister, who was listening in, said, she misses mom. Well, the exiles in Babylon, I think, felt it's about as bad as it can be.

But I think they missed God. And God wants to say, you're missing me. You come to inquire. You're looking for consolation. But consolation is not what you need right now, but rather a bit of confrontation.

Because you're not dealing with the real issues in our relationship. And then he goes on in a number of verses, verses 5 to 31, to describe to them this repeated pattern by which he has repeatedly sworn, has committed himself to them.

[10:29] They have repeatedly rebelled and engaged in idolatrous practices, causing God repeatedly to contemplate simply wiping them out, but refusing to do so because of his name, because of who he is.

Over and over again, generation after generation, the Lord swore himself to his people to be their faithful God. But over and over again, generation after generation, the people met his faithfulness with faithlessness.

When they were in Egypt, when in the wilderness, when in the land, and now in the early stages of the Babylonian captivity. The behavior of the people is also consistent, faithlessness in relation to a faithful God.

So, of course, this holy God cannot simply play along. He has to confront. And I would suggest that willingness to confront is a sign of good communication, a good relationship.

If you never confront your friend, faithful are the wounds of a friend. If you never confront a friend, you're not being a very good friend. So that's the first sign of a good relationship.

[11:42] That's the first thing I think we notice about this holy God. The second is that he does indeed communicate with his people. Look at verses 10 to 12. Here they are at Sinai.

Remember, they came out of Egypt. They're at Mount Sinai. And he says, Therefore I led them out of Egypt, and I'm reading the NIV here, and brought them into the desert. I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws.

For the man who obeys, the person who obeys them, will live by them. These are life-giving laws. And I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so that they would know that I, the Lord, made them holy.

Made them whole. This Sinai covenant, this covenant making, has been compared to something like a marriage ceremony.

Vows are exchanged. God pledges himself to his people and inducts them into this special relationship with him. He gives them decrees and laws by which they may experience life, good life, with him.

[12:48] The one who obeys them will live by them. And he also, if you will, more or less, exchanges rings. Now, by that I mean he gives them covenant signs. And he gives them his Sabbaths as a sign between us, so that the watching world would know that I, the Lord, have made you holy.

Now, these Sabbaths had more to do that, they weren't just referring to resting the seventh day of the week, but rather they had to do with all of Israel's Sabbaths, its festivals, its Jubilee year, the year of Jubilee.

It related to the economic institutions that were concerned with the relief of poverty, and oppression, slavery. So, when Israel abandons the Lord's Sabbaths, pulls away from him, it meant much more than just a lack of observance of one day a week.

As Chris Wright puts it, it reflected the total loss of Israel's distinctive socioeconomic system in the waves of oppression and exploitation that swamped the nation during the monarchy.

They were supposed to be living in a relationship with God, and they really had pulled away. So, the point of God's instruction to his people was not to diminish their lives.

[14:15] It was to enhance their lives. These were the instructions by which one might live. But the people refused. And this refusal helps explain perhaps the most confusing verse in the chapter, and that's verse 25, which says that God gave them statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by.

This verse has sometimes been described as one of the most perplexing verses in the Bible. I'm not so sure, although it has had an interesting history of interpretation. For example, early Christian interpreters sometimes cited this verse in the course of their anti-Jewish polemic.

John of Damascus, 8th century. Cites Ezekiel 20, 25. To support his contention that, and I quote him here, God finds fault with the commandments of the Old Testament.

End quote. I don't think so. I don't think God is finding fault with the commandments he had given. Now, a more modern theory is, which is also wrong.

I'll go ahead and tell you. A more modern theory that I think is wrong is that this represents a stage in the evolution of Israelite religion. A stage when child sacrifice, which is mentioned twice in this passage, you will have noticed, was approved.

[15:38] I don't think that's right either. Instead, I think if we pay attention to the repetitions, these references to the good laws that God gave, by which you shall live, by which you shall live, by which you shall live, three times it's repeated, and three times they refuse, when we see that context, I think we can begin to understand what's going on here.

God's saying, okay then, if you're not going to obey the good laws, I'm going to give you laws that are not good. In other words, I'm going to give you over to laws that are not good.

It's very much what we find throughout Scripture. We find it in Romans 1, for example. Those who refuse to honor God, but honor the things that are made, are given over.

Are given over. I think that's what's going on. God is not coercive. He doesn't force His way on people. If they refuse to heed His instructions, these life-giving instructions, He will give them over. Psalm 81, verses 11 and 12, puts it very clearly. But my people did not listen to my voice. Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own counsels.

[16:53] These are those laws that are not good. In Israel's particular case, they were in the land of Canaan. And Canaanite religion, as William F. Albright long ago pointed out, was particularly twisted.

This was a religion that engaged not only in idolatry, worshiping wood and stone, but also engaged in sexually immoral ritual practices on their high places, on their Bama, Bamaot, you hear the word Bama, there's a nice little pun in that verse in Hebrew because Bama means a high place, but also, what are you coming to, combines the Hebrew words for what and come.

It's really kind of clever. But it was a particularly egregious religious system that Israel found itself in the midst of.

It even involved child sacrifice. Look at verse 31. When you offer your gifts, the sacrifice of your sons in the fire, you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day.

Am I to let you inquire of me, O house of Israel? As surely as I live, declares the sovereign Lord, I will not let you inquire of me. Confrontation is needed.

[18:08] Communication is needed. And God, a holy God, is not going to just sweep this aside. He may, in fact, let his people go so that they can hit rock bottom and loathe themselves for what they've done.

Perhaps only then will they see their sin and return to him. This holy God doesn't stand aloof, but he cares very deeply for his people, cares enough to confront, to communicate.

And the third thing we notice is that he cares to contend with them. Look at verse 32. You say, we want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world who serve wood and stone, but what you have in mind will never happen.

What they're saying is, God, we're tired. We're tired of trying to be different. Just let us go. We want to be like everyone else. And God says, never, never.

What you have in mind will never happen. I'm going to contend for you. Now, if you were alive in the 60s and 70s and listened to the radio and listened to music, you certainly will have heard Neil Sadaka teach us all that breaking up is very hard to do.

[19:23] I want to suggest that Ezekiel would teach us, and God through Ezekiel, that sticking it out is even harder to do. To contend for a relationship in trouble is much harder than simply walking away.

And that's what the Holy God does. They say, let us go. Let us just be like everyone else, worshiping our counterfeit gods. And God says, never. Instead, this Holy God promises to continue to engage them.

He's going to gather them from all the nations. This is what He says in 33 to 36. I'll gather My people from the nations where they've been scattered. I'll bring them into their own wilderness experience, and there I will judge them.

Now, not a lot surprising that a Holy God is going to bring the people back and judge them. That doesn't surprise us so much. But what does surprise me and perhaps surprise us is verse 37.

Now, in the ESV, it says, I will make you pass under My rod which sounds sort of disciplinary. The NIV says, I will take note of you as you pass under My rod.

[ 20 : 34 ] And I think that's more the sense, even though the ESV probably gets the Hebrew a little bit better. But I think what we're looking at is a shepherd who uses his rod to count off the sheep as they enter the fold.

He's not whacking the sheep. He's counting them off. And so what he's saying is, I'm going to bring you, I'm going to take notice of you as you reenter the fold. And I will bring you into the bond of the covenant, he says.

Now, this image of the shepherd gathering his sheep into a sheepfold, counting each one as it passes through his rod, is not coercive. Again, those who continue to revolt and to rebel will be excluded, will be purged.

But the rest are brought back into the covenant. So what we're discovering as we look at this holy God is that, yes, he's a God who cannot compromise his standards, his character.

It's impossible for him to do that. It's not that it's contrary to his nature. But he also will not abandon his people. This holy God in action cares enough to confront his wayward people, to communicate life-giving ways to them without forcing them and to contend for them rather than simply letting them go even when they've given up on themselves.

[ 21 : 53 ] This is a God who will not give up. You'll give up on yourself long before he gives up on you. And there's one final thing and I think this is perhaps the most surprising.

It surprised me when I read it and perhaps encouraging in the last verse in the chapter, it's actually the English chapter division is a bit different where it continues on but verse 44 is the last in the Hebrew text.

It says in verse 44, You will know that I am the Lord when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and corrupt practices.

Now, what this is saying is God is saying I will unilaterally make this happen for you. There's not much you can do.

your evil ways but I'm going to make it happen. I will, I'm, and then you'll know that I am the Lord when I deal with you for my name's sake.

[ 22 : 54 ] That is, in keeping with who I am and not according to your evil ways. Now, this kind of draws together a number of themes in the book of Ezekiel. The first is the evil ways and practices of the people.

We hear about that a lot in this chapter and elsewhere. But they're not to have the last word. The second is the Lord's name. We hear a lot about that in this chapter and elsewhere. That, the Lord's name, who He is, His character, will have the final word.

And it also talks about the Lord's struggle with His people to the end that they will know who He is. Now, to know the Lord is to be in real, meaningful, genuine relationship with Him.

And that phrase, to know that I am the Lord, occurs 58 times in the book of Ezekiel out of a total of 72 times in the entire Old Testament. It's a major theme.

God wants His people to enter into relationship with Him. Now, that's a lot of talk about an ancient text. But, how would we conceptualize that for ourselves today?

[ 24 : 02 ] Have any of you read Sarah Young's book, Jesus Calling? I see that hand. That single hand. Well, it's an interesting book in which she takes up Scripture and then rewrites that Scripture as if Jesus is speaking directly to the reader.

You know, she's fictionalizing in some senses, but it's based on Scripture and it can be quite moving. So, let me try that with Ezekiel 20. But here, the Father is speaking.

And this is what He says. And, we all fall somewhere in this picture of God's people. Not all in the same place, but think about what He might be saying to you.

He says, you come wanting to talk to me, wanting to ask about this or that, about whether something in your circumstances is going to improve, but you don't seem to really want to talk about what matters.

And so, I'm not going to answer those lesser questions because we really need to talk about what's gone wrong in our relationship. You know how I promised over and over again to be true to you.

[ 25 : 15 ] But you've not been true to me. Again and again, I reached out to you and again and again, you shoved me away. And you've gone after your illicit affairs. You've gone after your gods of wood and stone.

I've told you how things can be right between us. I haven't left you in ignorance. I've given you instructions by which our life together can really flourish, but you're not interested. You've repeatedly strayed. In fact, you've moved so far away from me that you've either become depressed or so distant that you just want to throw in the towel and just forget the whole God thing and just become like the world.

But I'm not going to let you do that. That will never happen. I'm not like that. You may give up on yourself, but I'm not giving up on you. I love you and I'm going to do whatever it takes to save our relationship and bring you home.

And what will that take? Well, to answer that, I have to jump to Ezekiel 36, which is down the road a bit, but I think it's already been preached on. And here he says, well, let me tell you what it'll take. [ 26 : 26 ] My plan, this begins in Ezekiel 36, 23, my plan is to show myself wholly through you to a watching world. I'm going to make you clean.

I'm going to give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I'm going to remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. In fact, I'm going to give you my spirit, my Holy Spirit, who will dwell within you to inspire you to holiness and not only to inspire you, but to enable you.

Because honestly, without him, we don't stand a chance. Then you will truly live. Then you will be my people and I will be your God. I know this may seem impossible where you find yourself right now, but I, the Lord, have spoken and I will do it.

This is the heart of the Holy God who loves his people. David Peterson says that God's holiness poses a paradox because a Holy God must judge everything that is wrong, everything that is unholy.

And yet, he provides a way of cleansing and sanctification for sinners. Now, we who've been in Christian churches and are followers of Christ, we know ultimately how God resolves this paradox.

[ 27 : 47 ] How he became both just and the justifier of those who have faith in his Son. It was a costly way. But the God who is holy was willing to go the distance.

And this is good news. This is good news. It's good news that we glimpse in a few places in Ezekiel 20 that we see more brightly in later chapters in Ezekiel such as Ezekiel 36.

And it's good news that bursts into full glorious light in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Now, it's very difficult. I struggled with this and I got Paulie to struggle with me with this to find any kind of human relationship that comes anywhere close to the depth and profundity of God's love for us.

And she suggested, well, what about St. Augustine and Monica, his mother? Well, it's a fairly well-known tale and it doesn't do it all but it does some. So let me give you a little bit of his account of this relationship.

He talks about his profligate days between ages 19 and 28 and before that as well and about his mother's consistent prayers and strivings with him.

[ 29 : 04 ] She refused to give up on him even though she had every reason to do so. As a young man, Augustine sowed his wild oats and this is how he describes what he and his friends were up to.

He says, Such were the companions with whom I made my way through the streets of Babylon. Notice the metaphor. He also was in exile, I suppose. With them I rolled in its dungs, that is Babylon, in its dung as if rolling in spices and precious ointments to tie me down the more tenaciously to Babylon's belly, the invisible enemy trampled on me and seduced me because I was in the mood to be seduced.

Later on he writes, During this same period of nine years, from my 19th to my 28th year, our life was one of being seduced and seducing, seducing, being deceived and deceiving in a variety of desires.

Publicly, I was a teacher of arts, which they call liberal. Privately, I professed a false religion. He was adherent to Manichaeism for a time before he became a Christian.

In the former role as teacher, I was arrogant. In the latter, I was superstitious. In everything, vain. But Augustine's mother never gave up on him.

[ 30 : 28 ] And this is what she writes about her. For almost nine years then, for almost nine years then followed, during which I was in deep mire and darkness of falsehood.

Despite my frequent efforts to climb out of it, I was the more heavily plunged back into the filth and wallowed in it. During this time, this chaste, devout, and sober widow, he's referring to his mother,

one of the kind you love, already cheered by hope, but no less constant in prayer and weeping, never ceased her hours of prayer to lament about me to you.

Her prayer entered into your presence. He writes of his mother covering the tears, covering the ground with her tears. You, Lord, heard her and did not despise her tears which poured forth to wet the ground under her eyes in every place she prayed.

You heard her. Augustine was appreciative once he saw the light, became a Christian. He was appreciative of this constancy of his mother, but he saw behind it the constancy of a holy God who heard her prayer and prompted her prayer and he says this to God, O thou omnipotent God, thou carest for every one of us as if thou didst care for him only, and so for all of us as if they were but one.

I think Augustine's words capture something of the heart of this God who is holy. Little Hazel in kindergarten when things were about as bad as they could be, when she came home her mother was waiting and she missed mom.

[ 32 : 13 ] What God is saying, things may be about as bad as they could be, in your life, today, may seem about as bad as they can be, but if you'll come home, God is waiting and that's what we're missing.

I wasn't initially keen to preach on Ezekiel 20, but I've learned if the text is puzzling, problematic, don't look away, look deeper.

And as for my list of favorite divine attributes, I'm thinking it might need some reordering. I think holiness is going to rise considerably. Thanks. Thank you.