

Leviticus 9:22-10:3, 11:44-45 PM

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Date: 18 February 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, in case you missed it, and it's hard to miss it because it's size 3,000 behind me, we're beginning a new sermon series tonight through Lent, which is the 40 days before Easter.

It's called The Holy God Draws Near. And I have found in my life that people today are searching for God. I see this all the time in my work and in my life.

People want to understand why the world is the way it is and if there's any hope for humanity.

People want to know if there is meaning to their life. They want to know why we exist, because being told our existence is a random fluke of atomic particles feels inadequate.

And so people search for God. At the same time, other people run far from God. Some people don't want to be confronted with the reality of a holy God that they are responsible to.

And so they run as far as they can away from God. They live as if they're their own God, choosing for themselves right and wrong, and attempting to define their own morality and achieve their own sense of happiness, which often comes at the expense of others.

[1 : 26] So there's two types of people. There are those who are searching for God, and there are those who are running from God. And whether you're in either of these camps, here is the central truth of the Christian faith.

The holy God draws near to us. God comes to us so that we might know him. And some of us here have encountered the holy God drawing near.

So I suppose there's three types of people. There are those who are searching for God, there are those who are running from God, and there are those who know God, because God is drawn near to them.

So I wonder, at the beginning of Lent, where are you at tonight? Are you searching for God? Are you running away from God?

Or are you abiding in God? Every other religion and spirituality I can think of teaches that we need to reach up to God.

[2 : 31] We need to find God, and then we need to get God to accept us. We need to do things that God likes, so that God will like us.

We're taught in these faiths that we need to earn God's favor. The biblical faith is completely different. We're told in Scripture that God draws near to us.

Not because we're holy, or we're righteous, or we're good. We're not. God draws near to us because he wants to. He's the holy God who wants to bless and save unholy people.

God draws near because he wants to bless you and share his glory and his life with you. And that's what our text tonight's about.

It's about the holy God who draws near to unholy people. The book of Leviticus is about how unholy people can dwell with a holy God.

[3 : 39] It shows us the holiness of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and how God's justice and his mercy can coexist. Our text tonight in Leviticus starts in chapter 9.

It's on page 88 of that big black book in front of you. And it might be helpful for you if you opened it up and looked at it. I have two points from our text, and then I finish with an invitation.

And they're pretty simple. Point one. God is holy. The first thing we see in this text is that God is holy. That's the first thing you need to know about the Christian God.

The word holy means set apart. God is set apart. He is different from us.

He is unlike us. He's distinct. God is holy. He's set apart. Nothing is like him. No one threatens him.

[4 : 41] He lacks nothing. He needs nothing. He is almighty, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good.

He's holy. An image often given to describe God's holiness is fire.

You see it in our text in chapter 9, verse 24, and then again in chapter 10, verse 2. Fire is holy. It's different.

It's distinct from everything else in the world. A fire on a cold, dark night is glorious. It illuminates. It warms. It's attractive. We are drawn to its light and its heat, despite the danger if we get too close. Without fire from the sun, we couldn't live.

So you could say our lives are dependent on fire. It can be the source of incredible light and warmth. It can keep you alive when you're cold. It can give light when you're in the darkness.

[5 : 48] But fire can also be the source of terrible destruction. And even death, if you get too close, as we will see in our passage. So God's holiness is like a holy fire.

It is so good, but it can also be so dangerous. When God comes near, you cannot approach him casually. Or you'll be like a moth flying into a flame.

Leviticus 9 was written at a time when God has revealed his glory and his holiness to the world. God's people, the Israelites, were slaves in Egypt.

They were oppressed. They cried out to God to save them. And he did. The most powerful empire in the world. God defeated absolutely and spectacularly.

And he freed his people. He leads the Israelites out of Egypt and toward a land he promised them. Now, that all happened just before the words in Leviticus 9.

[6 : 55] This is the same generation of people in Leviticus 9 who experienced the exodus from Egypt. So God gave these people his law in the wilderness that they might be holy as he is holy.

And so that he might dwell with them. God came down from heaven to dwell with them, to be with them as they journeyed from Egypt to Israel. If you know the story, you know that God appeared as a pillar of smoke during the day leading his people.

And then as a pillar of fire at night. A constant unending reminder of his presence and his power and his desire to dwell with his people. The people experiencing Leviticus 9 have seen firsthand God's holiness and his glorious might.

God's holiness in our text is so good, it's so pure, it's so powerful, it's so majestic, that glory explodes from his presence.

This is what happens in Leviticus 9. Right before our text earlier, Aaron and his sons have been consecrated as priests. They've been ordained. And they're bringing the first sacrifice, an offering to God.

[8 : 06] Our text begins in verse 22. Look there now if you have your Bible open on page 88. That paragraph says, Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and he blessed them.

And he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. And when they came out, they blessed the people. And now look. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the Lord. And consumed the burnt offering.

And the pieces of fat on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they cried out and fell on their faces. No kidding. God has come to dwell with his people after 400 years of slavery in Egypt.

He's revealed himself to them. He's saved them. He's led them. He's protected them. And now he comes to dwell with them. And God's presence in the form of fire coming out of the tabernacle.

[9 : 11] And the glory of the Lord appearing to all people comes in verse 23. And we're told twice that all the people receive God's blessing.

And when they see God's presence and God's glory, they cry out and they fall down. Because the holy God draws near to them. And the human response is to fall on our faces as the weight of God's glory and holiness hits us.

His glory is like a consuming fire. Bursting with light and power. It is both awesome and terrifying. Majestic and mighty.

And the point of all of this is to show us the holiness of God as he draws near to humanity. So that we might share in his glory and receive his blessing.

So point one. God is holy. Point two. We are not. God is holy and he is holy good.

[10 : 19] He is righteous and he is just. He is good and merciful and gracious and he longs to bless his people. This is what the story of scripture has shown up to this point.

But humanity's response throughout the Bible is to take the blessings of God, but to reject the God who gives them. God draws near to us, but we run away.

We hide. We duck and cover. We don't want to dwell with a holy God. We want to live as if we are God ourselves. We sin.

We become unholy. Unclean. Unlike God. But God's response to our rebellion, incredibly, is grace. He doesn't give up on us. He doesn't withdraw. But instead he draws near. He provides. He protects. He speaks. He blesses and he saves and he makes covenants promising to be in permanent relationship with humanity despite our sin.

[11 : 25] And continuously humanity responds to God's blessing and God's goodness and God's grace with evil and with sin and with running away.

This shows us that God is holy, but we are not. And this is the tension throughout scripture. This is the tension throughout history.

This is often the tension within the church, if we're honest. Story after story of God's faithfulness and humanity's faithlessness and evil and sin.

And Leviticus describes how unholy people can dwell with a holy God. Because in Leviticus, God gives a temporary solution so that he can draw near.

And the solution is sacrifice. All of our sins, our unholiness, can be cast upon a sacrifice. And that sacrifice can receive the punishment we deserve.

[12 : 26] The blood of the sacrifice buys our forgiveness. The sins of sinful people are placed upon another living thing, usually an animal, whose blood atones for our sin.

This is what the entire sacrificial system was about. And God gives incredibly particular instructions on how it all works. Pages and pages and pages of instructions.

My Bible reading right now is in Leviticus, and it is tough. In our text, we see what happens when we disregard God's instructions.

And we try to approach him and please him on our own terms. So, as I said before, in Leviticus 9, Aaron has just been consecrated the high priest with his sons as his assistants.

It's their first day on the job. Their first sacrifice goes really well. We just read about that holy fire and God's glory being revealed and God's people being blessed. But now, immediately, following this incredible event, Aaron's sons try to capitalize on God's presence and power and blessing.

[13 : 34] Right after, in chapter 10, they grab a censer. That's like a metal pan that you'd put coals in with some incense and you'd wave it around the holy place. And they offer this incense and smoke to the Lord.

But there's a problem. Their offering is unauthorized. God has not commanded them to do this. More than that, God has forbidden it.

God has just given his people detailed instructions on how he is to be worshipped. And how unholy people can approach the holy God.

But these rookie priests, in their first act, disregard God and his word and they take matters into their own hands. They approach God on their own terms rather than listening to what he has instructed.

They're listening to their own will rather than God's will. And that is sin. And so we're told in verse 2 of chapter 10, And fire came down from before the Lord and consumed them.

[14 : 41] And they died before the Lord. I don't think there's any Sunday school lessons on this text, are there, Will? Aaron's sons are judged for their wickedness and sin.

And they die on the spot. Now I suspect you feel that seems a bit harsh. Unfair even. They made a small mistake and God killed them for it.

This makes God seem mean, harsh, violent, unpredictable. One saw on the stake and Aaron's sons are killed. This text reveals to us that before a holy God, there is no such thing as a small sin.

Sin is serious. Any sin. This doesn't mean all sin is the same or deserves equal punishment. But once you grasp the holiness of God, you see the wretchedness of our sin.

Lent, traditionally, is supposed to be a season of self-reflection. A season of increased self-awareness of your sins. And a season of renewed repentance and confession and renewal.

[15 : 54] God is an all-consuming fire who dwells in unapproachable light. He's holy good. There's no impurity in him. His eyes are too pure even to look on evil.

This is why he is holy. Elsewhere in scripture, there's a vision of sinless angels crying before him, holy, holy, holy, while covering their eyes.

Because even for them, God's holiness and glory and majesty is unbearable to endure. So when the priests in Leviticus, the leaders of God's people, ignore God, ignore his word, and act as gods

themselves, choosing to do whatever they want before a holy God, of course his holiness and purity burns against them.

Because God has decreed how he is to be approached by unholy people. But if unholy people disregard his instructions, then they stand before him condemned. So once you begin to understand the holiness of God, you see why sin is not small.

All sin is impurity. And it cannot stand before the holiness of God. To approach God, we must realize the problem of our situation.

[17:14] We stand before a holy God as unholy sinners. If we don't listen to God's commandments, if we don't care about God's will for our lives, then we stand before him condemned and deserving judgment and death.

That's exactly what Nadab and Abihu receive. They're judged on the spot. They become an example through the rest of history to God's people that you cannot draw close to God while disregarding what he says.

You can never forget the holiness of God. God speaks through Moses in verse 3, right after this happens, and he says, Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy.

In the sight of all the people, I will be honored. Nadab and Abihu dishonored God by not listening to him. To allow them to do so would diminish God's holiness.

They're killed to prove the holiness of God. You can't mess with God. You can't play games with God and his holiness. We can't create our own rules for how we are to live and how we can draw near to God.

[18:28] God's fair. He is just. He tells us that wickedness will be judged and sin will be punished before him. This is why he is holy. It's because he does not tolerate evil.

Sin must be punished, or else God couldn't be called holy and just. His glory would be diminished if evil were left unchecked. So God is holy, and we are not.

And yet, the holy God draws near. The passage ends with an invitation. Flip the page to chapter 11, verse 44.

God reveals himself to his people and says, I am the Lord, your God. God identifies himself with sinful people.

I am yours, he says. I am holy, and you are not. And yet, I am your God. I want to dwell with you.

[19:35] What I want from you is relationship. God draws near, despite our sin. He knows who we are, and he comes anyway.

He comes close, and he invites us to enter into relationship with him. And if you do, here's the invitation. This is chapter 11, verse 44. Therefore, consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy.

For I am holy. You shall therefore be holy. For I am holy. Verse 45. For I am the Lord, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God.

You shall therefore be holy. For I am holy. The holy God draws near, and he invites unholy people to become holy.

Like him. God reminds his people of the great lengths he has gone to in order to bless them and dwell with them. Because what he wants is relationship.

[20:37] He wants to be their God. He doesn't want them to die before him. The holy God draws near, and he invites his people to respond by being holy. As he is holy.

You find this refrain throughout the whole Old Testament. Be holy as I am holy. And what we see again, and again, and again, is God's people fail at this invitation.

They become worse, and worse, and worse. Their evil expands, and grows, and festers. Maybe this is how you feel week after week.

You come to church, and you leave committed to being holy. But no sooner have you left the building than you fall into the same sins that so easily entangle us.

Well, that's what continuously has happened in the Old Testament. For 1,500 years, the Israelites get more and more entangled in evil and sin, despite God drawing near and constantly inviting them to be holy.

[21:42] God's people are unable or unwilling to be holy. They reject God again and again and fail to listen to his law. And friends, this is our story too.

This is the reason every week we begin our service with confession. Every week we gather, and we begin by turning to God and saying, we have done what we ought not to have done.

And we have not done what we should have. There's no health in us. We are not holy. We are not like you. We have failed to be holy as you are holy.

We recognize we're sinners, and we don't have the ability within ourselves to be holy as God is. But then you flip to our second reading in Hebrews chapter 7.

This is on page 1004. And in verse 19, it tells us the situation of the Israelites in Leviticus is no longer our situation. Because it says in verse 19, a better hope has been introduced through which we draw near to God.

[22 : 57] See, left to our own effort, we would fail to be holy just like the Israelites did. Our situation would feel hopeless. And God knows this.

So he draws near again to provide the answer. God gives us a new hope, a new way to be holy as he is holy. And the hope, Hebrews 9 tells us, is Jesus.

In verse 22, it says he is the guarantor. He is the one who guarantees for us a better covenant than God's covenant with Israel in the time of Leviticus.

Because Jesus, not Aaron, and not Aaron's sinful sons, is our high priest. And Jesus is perfectly holy. He is holy, holy, holy.

He is totally innocent. This is verse 26. He's unstained. He's separate from sinners and exalted above the heavens. He has no need like those high priests to offer sacrifices daily.

[23 : 56] First for his own sins and then for those of the people. Since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. We've been given a high priest who is perfect.

Who is holy as God is holy. Because Jesus is the son of God. And this perfect, permanent high priest has on our behalf offered one sacrifice.

A perfect sacrifice that never needs to be repeated. Because he offered himself to appease the holiness of God. By atoning for the sin of humanity.

We can draw near to God because of him. Through faith in him we receive God's Holy Spirit. Who abides in us and works within us to empower us and make us holy.

So that we can be holy as God is holy. See friends, we are in such a better state than the Israelites were in Leviticus 9.

[24 : 58] Yes, God is holy. Yes, we are not. But for us, a better hope has been introduced. Through which we can draw near to God.

In Jesus, God has drawn near to us. He has made a way for our sin to be punished and forgiven.

So that we can be saved and made holy. And the way is Jesus, offering himself as a sacrifice for all our sin.

Thanks be to God. Amen.