

**"The Holiness of God"
(Exodus 15:11)
Pastor Peter Yi
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Introduction:

NIV Exodus 15:11

"Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?

*Who is like you—
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders?*

For millennia the primary way by which spiritual growth for Christians was measured was in units of holiness. You and I were able to tell right away that a person was growing as a Christian because it was very evident that he or she was becoming more holy. They were sinning less and obeying more. They were become more like the one they had committed to follow. We still do it that way to some degree today, but not as much. In our day we have begun to measure spiritual growth in other ways. Service, how many committees or teams we are serving on. How high you raise your hands when you worship. How big your bible is. Or how long you've been a Christian. Maybe some title we carry in the church. And those can be some of the signs of spiritual growth, but I think we've strayed from the biblical definition.

The bible speaks of spiritual maturity and spiritual growth in several different ways, but if you narrow them all down, it measures spiritual growth in degrees of holiness.

Why the shift in the definition of spiritual growth? I think it's because something has gone awry in Christianity. There has been a cataclysmic shift from a God-centered approach to everything Christian, to a man-centered approach. The way Christians do church has gotten away from basic things such as prayer and scripture and mission to marketing and strategy and advertising.

There has been a shift in the way Christians view God as well. In the past, God was often considered sovereign, almighty, holy, but that doesn't seem to be the focus today. These days Christians seem to view God more as friend. The majesty and glory of God have been replaced with a pocket-sized deity. God who was once the one worthy of all my obedience and devotion has now become nothing more than my personal genie that exists to make my problems go away. God was once a God for whom Christians made incredible sacrifices, now God is the one who exists to make my life cushy and comfy. We've allowed ourselves to focus merely on the love of God apart from the holiness of God. Mercy, in the absence of judgment. A great shift has occurred. And I believe Christians are worse for it. We have lost much of our effectiveness in society. We are not experiencing victory over sin and its power.

So I hope we can begin to change that and begin to think great thoughts of God once again. I truly believe that only when we reclaim a biblical view of God, and begin to apprehend the awesomeness of God, will we begin to live our lives rightly and in holiness.

Last week I mentioned that the primary reason we are to be holy is not because of some benefit to us, but because of God. Our theme verse for the year is from 1 Peter 1:15-16, which is copied from a couple references in Leviticus, and it goes like this.

¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;

¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

(1Pe 1:15-16 NIV)

The holiness of God is the starting point, the reference point for our pursuit of holiness.

Because this is so, we need to understand, perhaps more than anything else, what it means that God is holy. Before we begin our personal and corporate pursuit of holiness we must understand what it means that God is holy. And I don't mean merely an intellectual understanding – memorizing definitions and understanding concepts, but in the core of our spirits, in our hearts, we need to know and believe, and experience deeply what it means that God is holy. In other words, you and I must once again, have a personal encounter with our holy God. The saints in the bible had that experience.

Moses –his encounter with the burning bush was an encounter with a holy God. Remember the physical act he had to perform to approach the bush? What did God ask him to do?

⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3)

It was an encounter with a holy God.

Job – one of the most incredible descriptions of an individual encountering the holiness of God.

Job was a righteous man who believed that God had done injustice to him and if he gets his day in court with God, he'll have his defense team ready to prove to God that this is so. Well unbeknownst to him, that day finally arrives. And God pummels him with a barrage of unfathomable, unanswerable questions. And while God does that, Job begins to understand who God is, and then as a result, who he himself is. Here's Job's response after God speaks.

Then Job replied to the LORD:

² "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

³ *You asked*, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

⁴ "*You said*, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.'

⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

(Job 42:1-6 NIV)

What about David's God encounter when he pens Psalm 8?

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

² From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

³ When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?

⁵ You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

⁶ You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:

⁷ all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,

⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

⁹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

(Psa 8:1-9 NIV)

When David says, “what is man...” it is the response of one who has encountered a holy God.

The Apostle Peter had a God encounter with Jesus in Luke 5.

Jesus approaches Peter and says, hey lets go fishing. Peter is reluctant because they had just been out all night fishing with no success, but for whatever reason, he eventually complies and they go fishing. And they haul in the catch of a lifetime. So many fish were caught that the boat began to sink, that they had to call out to their friends on a nearby boat for assistance. So in the middle of a lake, in the middle of a boat are standing Peter and Jesus, there's the stench of fish slime, the sight and the sound of fishes flopping around all over the bottom of the boat, what do you expect the next words to be? What are Peter's next words? “Here's my business card.” The next words that come out of Peter's mouth are astonishing.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luk 5:8 NIV)

What? Why would he say that? Again here is the sequence of events. Peter meets Jesus. He goes fishing with Jesus. Large catch of fish. I am a sinful man. It doesn't make sense, does it? What's going on?

The answer is in Isaiah chapter 6. This is another one of the top 5 God encounters in all of scripture.

Isaiah, the prophet of God, is in the temple and he encounters God like few have encountered Him. It's as if he's given a glimpse of the glory of heaven. And in this vision he sees God in heaven on his throne and around God were heavenly six-winged creatures. And they absolutely needed all six of their wings. You might think that's a bit redundant, but there was a purpose. Two were for flying and four were for covering—two for the eyes and two for the feet. Because these were the angelic beings that ministered close to the throne of God they needed to cover their eyes from the blazing white holiness of God. And they needed to cover their feet, as a symbol of their creatureliness, ministering before their creator. And these angelic beings called out to one another these words,

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isa 6:3 NIV)

So you get the picture. And then comes the words of the prophet Isaiah.

⁵ "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (Isa 6:5 NIV)

Who did Isaiah see in the temple that day that made him utter the words of horror and terror? God, yes, of course. But anyone else? Seraphim, angels, yes, them too. But anyone else? Yes. Listen to what the disciple John writes in his gospel.

³⁸ This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:

⁴⁰ "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn--and I would heal them."

⁴¹ Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.

(Joh 12:38-41 NIV)

The vision of the holiness of God that Isaiah witnessed was the vision of the holiness of Jesus. Isaiah saw Jesus in the temple that day.

Okay now, back to Peter and Jesus in the boat. Let's go fishing. They go fishing. Huge catch of fish. Boat begins to sink. Calls for help. Fish stink. Fish flopping. Peter drops to his knees and utters these words. Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man. Is it beginning to make sense? Peter had an encounter with the holiness of God, the holiness of Jesus. The same holiness that Moses saw, David saw, Job saw, Isaiah saw.

What is it that all these saints encountered when they encountered the holiness of God? What is that? What is the holiness of God?

The holiness of God, says one author, is very hard to describe because there is no comparison to which we can describe it. For example we use other colors to help describe a particular color. We say it's a grayish black. We describe different metals that way. Lead is not iron, it doesn't possess any magnetic properties. It's similar to tungsten in density, but it is much more malleable. It's softer than gold, but nowhere nearly as rare or valuable and so on. But with the holiness of God, the author says, it is very difficult to describe because in the definition of holiness is the concept of indescribability. How does one describe the indescribable?

The memory verse of the month and today's scripture verse helps us understand what it means that God is holy. "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Majestic in holiness."

The definition of holiness is "who among the gods is like you."

Most Christians when they consider the holiness of God think first of the moral component of holiness. When we say God is holy, we mean God is sinless, God is good, God is pure, God is just and of course that's true. But, that is not the primary definition of holy according to the bible.

The primary definition of holiness is "who among the gods is like you." It is uniqueness. "Here O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One"

There is none like him. The best that human understanding and human language can do in describing the indescribable is to compare the incomparable. God, there is only one God, you. The rest are idols. There is no comparison. Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? (the answer? No one!)

The holiness of God is the total otherness of God. Only God is uncreated. Only God is infinite. Only God is independent. There is none like God.

1 Samuel 2:2 says it like this.
2 "There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

One theologian describes God's holiness like this. "The holiness of God is part of the non-rational in God, which cannot be thought of conceptually, and which includes such ideas as "absolute unapproachability" and "absolute overpoweringness" or "aweful majesty."

The holiness of God is so difficult to describe, the theologian has to make up words. "Absolute overpoweringness." Haha. Isn't that awesome?

But then the theologian goes on to say this.

"It (the holiness of God) awakens in man a sense of absolute nothingness, a "creature-consciousness" or "creature-feeling," leading to absolute self-abasement (72-73).

4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
Wrote David.

"Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luk 5:8 NIV) said Peter

Jonathan Edwards in the 1700's wrote of a similar experience during one of his quiet times. He writes,

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception ... which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have, several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.

Many Christians don't think that way these days. They think about how lucky God is to have me on his team. What would God do without me? Rarely do you hear of Christians who have had the "holy encounter" with God.

When was the last time we said, "Woe is me?" "I am ruined." "Go away from me Lord, I am a sinner." "Who am I?" Those are the responses of Christians who have encountered the absolute otherness of a holy God. Christians need to recapture a sense of the holiness of God like our forefathers have. Only then will we relate to God rightly. Only then will our thoughts of God begin to match the greatness of God. Only when we see the holiness of God will we have any measure of success in our own holiness. For those reasons, we must encounter our holy God.

May that be our hearts yearning and desire this year. That God, in all of his otherness, his holiness, would meet us and that we would encounter him deeply. Let us pray.