

# Terrifying and Beautiful Holiness of God

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*Jubilee+ CEO Natalie Williams considers how the cross transforms our view of God's holiness.*



It is easy to hone in on the characteristics of God that we like best. I am known for writing and speaking about the mercy of God – I consider that to be my life’s message. But there is a risk in being so enamoured with one specific attribute of God: it can have the unintended consequence that we develop a lop-sided view of him.

To know and understand God, as Jeremiah 9:24 assures us we can, we need to see him as he truly is, rather than making him in our image. This means we mustn’t separate the attributes of God. It is wonderful for me to celebrate his mercy, but I need to recognise that God is who he is not just because he is merciful, but because he is merciful and holy and wise and powerful and omniscient and sovereign ... and so on.

In fact, it is only in view of God’s mercy than we develop the desire to present ourselves to him as holy (Romans 12:1), and it is only in view of God’s holiness that we can truly understand how mind-blowing his mercy is towards us.

But in my early years as a Christian, I did not really like thinking about the holiness of God. My knee-jerk reaction to it, before I could help myself, was negative. I thought of it as demanding (I must behave a certain way to live up to a standard that is too high for me) and prohibitive (I must not behave in certain ways that are unworthy of a follower of Jesus).

I recognise that those thoughts come from a desire to decide for myself what is right and wrong, what is good and evil. Left to my own devices, I wish I got to choose. Our society tells me it is my right to make up my own mind.

In line with this thinking, I used to imagine that when I see Jesus face-to-face, I will reel off a list of questions for him. ‘Why did x happen?’ ‘Why did you say y is not okay?’ ‘Why did you tell me to do z?’

But whenever we read in the Bible about people encountering God up close, their responses are quite different to what I imagined mine might be.

## A FEARFUL VISION

In Isaiah 6:1-5, we find that even the seraphim cover their faces as they cry ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord’ and Isaiah’s own response is not, ‘Let me ask you about a few things...’ but rather, ‘Woe is me!’

Isaiah found the vision of God terrifying, because when we see God in his holiness, all our sins are exposed for the evil they really are. In that fearful moment, Isaiah did not offer excuses. There was no defence. He didn’t

present any mitigating circumstances: ‘If you knew my background ...’ ‘My motives were good ...’ There was no ‘but it was only a little lust, a little white lie, a little pride, a little envy ...’

When Isaiah saw God clearly, in all his holiness, Isaiah also saw himself clearly, in all his crimson sinfulness.

Hundreds of years later, demons were quicker than the religious people to recognise who Jesus was, crying out: ‘I know who you are – the Holy One of God’ (Mark 1:24).

Some of the disciples grasped something of the holiness of Jesus too. For example, when Simon Peter realised that Jesus was the Messiah, his response was to fall down in recognition of his sinfulness (Luke 5:8).

Even John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the one who had walked closely with him for three years, fell down as though dead at the sight of Jesus in all his resplendent holiness (Revelation 1:12-18).

## HOLINESS HIGHLIGHTS SIN

The holiness of God is terrifying because it shows us how pure he is, and how sinful we are. When people in the Bible see God’s holiness, it isn’t questions or comments or suggestions that tumble out of their mouths. It isn’t even praise. It’s confession. As Jackie Hill Perry writes in her book Holier Than Thou: ‘Holiness makes honesty an obligation.’

The more we realise how holy God is, the more aware we become of our sinfulness. There is a strange paradox here – for those of us who have been following Jesus for a long time, we will know that we are becoming more holy (I no longer swear or steal, for example), but we are also becoming more aware of our sinfulness.

The closer I get to the light of God’s holiness, the more I see how grubby I am. He is pure, spotless, righteous in all his ways. And my sin is offensive to him.

As a society, we are so familiar with the patience of God (whether we realise it or not) that we are more shocked by his judgment than by his forbearance.

The right response to the holiness of God is to fall down in fear, cry out, and try to cover ourselves. Yet, wonderfully, Jesus has made a way for us to find God’s holiness beautiful. For those who have put their faith in Christ and made him Lord, we no longer need to cower and take cover, but can now revel and rejoice in the beauty of his holiness.

This is only possible because of the cross, of course. God is perfectly just, so he cannot just ignore our sin.

In fact, he cannot even look at it (Habakkuk 1:13). Just as darkness cannot co-exist with light, so God’s holiness cannot co-exist with our sin.

## HOLINESS BECOMES BEAUTIFUL

The only way we can find God’s holiness beautiful is to be holy ourselves – to be as morally pure, spotless and untainted as he is. But we cannot do it. Only one human being has ever lived a perfectly holy life: Jesus. He is the only one who could say, truthfully: ‘I always do what pleases him’ (John 8:29).

Always. Jesus lived a completely holy life – he never sinned, he never lied, he never had a mixed motive, he never did anything wrong, neither deliberately nor accidentally. Yet he became sin for us, so that we might become the very righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). It is extraordinary!

The holiness of God becomes beautiful to sinners because of the cross of Christ, where he paid for our sins. For those who trust in his salvation, we can confidently approach the throne that made Isaiah cower in fear (Hebrews 4:16). Our sin has been laid on Jesus, and because of that we are forgiven and cleansed. He has removed our sin as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

God’s hatred of sin did not stop him loving us. His love for us caused him to devise a plan to save us from our sins (2 Samuel 14:14). God is so holy that he cannot clear the guilty. Sin matters. But because Jesus died in our place and paid the price for our sins, we can be transformed by the holiness of God rather than destroyed by it. We will still fall down at the feet of Jesus, but secure in the knowledge that he has made us like him – holy.

Once we see God’s holiness through the cross, we are free to find it beautiful. And it really is! The holiness of God means he cannot sin. It means his words and his works can be completely trusted because it is impossible for him to sin against us, or to break a promise he has made to us. Sinners cannot be trusted, but God can. He is always true, always faithful, never lies, never changes. He is without fault. God’s holiness is wonderful!

## IN THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS

We have been reconciled to God the Father through Christ and presented holy in his sight (Colossians 1:22). We will never be treated as our sins deserve, because Jesus already was! As 1 Chronicles 16:29 says, we can now worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness – that is, his holiness, and ours.



How are we to respond? The Bible tells us that we have been made holy and are becoming holy. The only appropriate response is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). Growing in holiness is not a passive endeavour. It happens by beholding Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we gaze on his holiness and marvel at how he has dealt with our sin, we find him more and more beautiful, and then it becomes the desire of our hearts to love him, honour him, obey him, and live for him.

And the most wonderful news of all is that we get to be like him.

## NATALIE WILLIAMS

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## PRAYER FOCUS

**JUBILEE+:** For the charity's commitment to see churches change the lives of all who live in poverty in communities; for local churches to have compassion and a desire to engage with those living in poverty within their neighbourhoods and be empowered to tackle the issue; for those living in poverty to respond to outreach and find the love of Jesus. (Galatians 6:9; 1 John 3:17-18).

**FOCUS ON THE CHURCH: MET: Chris Briggs as he takes up office as Chair;** for the Executive and Trustees; for wisdom and discernment on the way forward; David Hull as he prepares to take on the MET:Revive Ambassador Role; ongoing Bible studies and prayer meetings. (Isaiah 41:9-13; Hebrews 10: 22-24).

**Methodist Church:** The President and Vice President of Conference, Rev Helen Cameron and Mrs Carolyn Godfrey; Secretary of Conference, Rev Dr Jonathan Hustler; all in positions of leadership; for an awareness across the connexion of the shift away from Biblical values, for a desire to halt this and to bring about repentance. (Acts 20: 28; Proverbs 3:1-6).

**FOCUS ON NATIONAL ISSUES: Integrity and Accountability:** For all institutions and services throughout the nation - both public and private sectors,

media & government; all decisions made for the good of the population and not individual interests. (Proverbs 10:9; 1 Peter 3:10-12).

**Hospices and End-of-Life Care:** Resources and adequate funding for palliative care, care homes, and hospices (especially where beds have had to be withdrawn owing to lack of funding); nurses, doctors and all who care for the terminally ill, struggling to deliver good quality care owing to the lack of necessary resources. (John 14:1-3; Hebrews 6:10).

**FOCUS ON WORLD ISSUES: America:** The Trump administration: for godly policies; the effects across the globe of possible decisions taken – particularly in trade and defence; peace and unity across the nation in the different factions. (1 Timothy 2:1-2; Philippians 2:3-8).

**Political Instability:** the growing political discontent across the planet; in Europe – France, Germany, Britain and across the world; protection of democracy in South Korea; for stability in Syria, that the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham will hold to its statement of establishing a democracy in the country. (Psalm 37:5-7; Psalm 118:8-9).