



Holy, Holy, Holy

It is what makes God God. It is His defining characteristic. Not power. Not grace. Not even love.

Think about it. All of those things can be demonstrated – admittedly in very small doses – by puny, created beings like you and me. We can create. We can exercise authority. We can forgive. For moments at a time, we can even love, truly and selflessly, keeping no record of wrongs and bearing all things. Then the moment passes.

But there is one thing we cannot replicate, even for a second. That something is *holiness*. Of course we can make right choices and choose not to sin in a given opportunity. We can resist a temptation. But that does not make us holy, not even for a second. That makes us temporarily righteous. But we are still impure. We are stained. We are like the rest of creation. We are sinners. We can debate about when that started – whether we owe it to Adam, or Eve, or the serpent; or whether we stained ourselves with that first sin at some age we no longer remember – but the end result is the same. None of us is, will ever be, can ever be, holy.

In English, we emphasize adjectives by using adverbs, usually something like “very” or “totally.” In Hebrew, scholars tell us, the speaker emphasizes by repetition, and double repetition is saved for only the superlative. In English, we would say that God is “very very holy” or “absolutely totally holy.” In Hebrew, the superlative is “holy, holy, holy.”

In the Hebrew text of Isaiah 6, the seraphim refer to God as “holy, holy, holy.” That is the highest emphasis. And it is reserved for that one characteristic. Nowhere does the Bible call God “mighty, mighty, mighty.” He is never described as “mercy, mercy, mercy.” Not even “love, love, love.”

I think we are intended to notice that. In the grand description of ultimate worship found in Revelation, we return to the same theme: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”

Of course we worship a God who is merciful and mighty and forgiving and powerful and creative and, in a way that we – but for fleeting moments – never duplicate, loving.

But what amazes us most, what ultimately demands our worship, is that He is holy. Unstained. Pure. Set apart. Unique. To say that He cannot abide sin is not to call Him arrogant, unwilling to lower Himself to mix with us failures; rather, He cannot abide sin because His very nature is holy. Like a positive pole on a magnet cannot abide another magnet’s positive pole, God and sin cannot coexist. It is a matter not of choice but of nature.

That is why Paul tells us it is a mystery – how the holy one could become sin so that we could become righteous. That we can stand in His presence, when we, like the second magnet, should be repelled, is a mystery wrapped in grace wrapped in triumph. And if we are paying attention at all, we stand there amazed.

We respond to love with thanksgiving. We respond to grace with faith. We respond to almighty creation with awe. But we respond to holiness by casting down our crowns and bowing down before Him. He alone is worthy, for He alone is holy.

Sing this hymn in your best Hebrew, for there is none beside God. Only He is holy, holy, holy.

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