

# The Holiness of God

Numbers 4:1–20, 46–49

The title of our sermon this morning is “The Holiness of God.” Now the words for *holy* and *holiness* occur eleven times in our chapter, but it is not immediately obvious, because they are translated in different ways: “most holy things” (vv. 4, 19, 20); “the sanctuary” (vv. 12, 15 [2x], 16); “holy thing” (v. 15).

The basic meaning of *holiness* is *apartness*: God is totally *other*, not a part of the creation that we apprehend with our five senses: touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell. False gods (small *g*)—the things that capture our attention and divert it away from Christ and take precedence over God’s worship—originate in the mind of man. They are manmade. On the other hand, the God who reveals himself in the Bible is the Creator. He *spoke* the universe into existence by his powerful word. Sometimes people wonder *Who created God?* The answer, of course, is *No one*. God is not a created being; he is pure Spirit, *not* a part of this creation.

The basic meaning of *holiness* is *apartness* or *separateness*. This is the idea conveyed by the Bible words for *holy*: *קָדוֹשׁ* (*qadōsh*, Hebrew) and *ἅγιος* (*agios*, Greek). But in English we have two different roots commonly used to translate these words: *holy* (of Germanic origin) and *sacred* (from Latin). *Hallowed* and *consecrated* are variations.<sup>1</sup> There is no word *holify*, so we use *sanctify*. English can get confusing!<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the holiness of God comes through powerfully in this chapter, as we shall see. Psalm 99, which directs us to worship God alone, specifically declares that God is holy: “Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy hill; for *the LORD our God is holy*.” That is a truth that every man, woman and child needs to learn. The God to whom we all will give account is *holy*.

In our chapter this morning Moses and Aaron are commanded to take a census of the male members of the three families of the Levites: the Kohathites (v. 2), the Gershonites (v. 22) and Merarites (v. 29). The men who were to be numbered were to be between ages 30 and 50, “all who enter the service to do the work in the tabernacle of meeting.” This is different from the earlier census of the Levites in chapter 3 that we encountered last week. That one was more general—numbering everyone from a month old and above. But now it is only males between 30 and 50 who were to be numbered. Why? Because it was they who would do the difficult work of carrying the tabernacle and its furnishings through the desert as they made their journey to the Promised Land. Men between 30 and 50 are in the prime of

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<sup>1</sup> קָדוֹשׁ – (noun) *sacredness, holiness, apartness, holy thing*. קָדוֹשׁ – (adjective) *sacred, holy*; “the most holy things” (קָדוֹשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים) (also translated “holy of holies”; cf. ἅγιος ἁγίων, Heb. 3:3; NKJV: “holiest of all”). The phrase קָדוֹשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים (Holy of Holies) occurs 17 times: Ex. 26:33 (2x); Num. 4:4, 19; 18:9, 10; 1 Kgs. 6:16, 7:50, 8:6; Ezek. 41:4; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65; 1 Chron. 6:4; 2 Chron. 3:8, 10; 4:22; 5:7.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, *belief* comes from Middle English; *faith* comes from Latin.

their physical strength, and by that time in life they should evidence maturity and sound judgment. Matthew Poole points out that even John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus himself did not begin their ministry until age 30.<sup>3</sup> Ministers of the Gospel should be men of maturity and reputation—qualities that are difficult to attain below age 30.

Younger Levites would receive on-the-job training under the oversight and direction of their older brethren. Men older than 50 would assist with tasks that did not involve heavy lifting, such as teaching, counseling, and judging.

The mention of ages 30–50 brings to mind the normal aging process. We all age! If you are young and have lots of energy, you need to know that you will not have it forever. “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass.”<sup>4</sup> Someday we will all go to our eternal home<sup>5</sup>—either heaven or hell. In the interim we should aim to live every day to the glory of God: “whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men . . . for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24). “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth!”<sup>6</sup>

I have three points this morning: (1) a singular privilege, (2) a grave danger, and (3) a lifelong pursuit. First,

### **1. A Singular Privilege**

We read in our text: “This is the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of meeting, relating to the most holy things: When the camp prepares to journey, Aaron and his sons shall come, and they shall take down the covering veil and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. Then they shall put on it a covering of badger skins, and spread over that a cloth entirely of blue; and they shall insert its poles. . . . Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint each of them [the Levites] to his service and his task.”

The job of the Levites was to assist the priests in the worship of God. When it was time to break camp and move God’s people to the next place along their journey, it was the priests—Aaron and his sons—who were to pack up all the parts of the tabernacle, its furnishings and utensils, and get them properly covered up and mounted on their frames, so that they could be carried, with the removable poles installed in their sockets, so that the Levites could carry them through the desert. Aaron and his sons would oversee the whole operation, appointing each of the Levites to his task. Everything was triple-covered. The covering veil—the curtain between the holy place and the most holy place—would shield the holy items from view, the badger skins would protect the holy articles from the weather, and the blue cloth would clearly identify them and give them a uniform

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<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, note on Num. 4:3 (Logos Bible Software)

<sup>4</sup> 1 Pet. 1:24

<sup>5</sup> Eccl. 12:5

<sup>6</sup> Eccl. 12:1

appearance, marking the presence of God in the midst of his people. As we read through this chapter we marvel at the level of detail. We think: *I'm glad new covenant worship is simpler; we don't have to do these things anymore.*

But think of what these things represented! As we've seen in previous sermons, the tabernacle and its furnishings, utensils, sacrifices and services represented the presence of God among his people and his taking Israel as his own peculiar possession. Though the things that are described in this chapter are foreign to us, they were actually a singular privilege for the Israelites. The God of heaven had entered into covenant with Israel. He had chosen them for his own special people. He had revealed the knowledge of himself to them. He had a special relationship with them. He said: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth."<sup>7</sup> The nations of earth were walking in the gross darkness of heathenism. Israel alone had the knowledge of the truth. God would lead his people in the way that they should go. He would comfort and strengthen them for the journey. He did this for no other people.

Think of what the tabernacle furnishings (also called sanctuary furnishings) represented. The ark of the covenant (called here the "ark of testimony," v. 5), contained the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments engraved by the finger of God, summarizing his moral law. It also held a jar of manna, sent down every day, six days a week, to feed the Israelites in the wilderness. The manna—supernaturally preserved to prevent spoilage—prefigured Christ as the bread of life. Also in the ark of the covenant was Aaron's rod that budded, abiding proof that God had chosen Aaron and his sons to the priesthood.<sup>8</sup>

The table of showbread with its bread (v. 7), replenished with fresh loaves every Sabbath, prefigured Christ, the true bread from heaven who would come to this earth to feed his people, strengthening them to serve him.<sup>9</sup>

The lampstand (v. 9) prefigured Christ, the Light of the world, who gave his people the knowledge of himself and of his will.

The golden altar (v. 11) was the place for offering sacrifices and burnt offerings. The ashes were removed for travel, but the fire which had come down from heaven was kept burning and carried from place to place.<sup>10</sup>

The altar of incense (v. 16) prefigured Christ, the Great High Priest, who intercedes for his people continually, night and day, with effectual intercession.

The utensils (the lamps, wick-trimmers, trays, oil vessels, firepans, forks, shovels, basins, etc., vv. 10–14) were used by the priests in the regular daily and weekly service as they carried out their duties, keeping the lamps burning and

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<sup>7</sup> Amos 3:2

<sup>8</sup> Heb. 9:14

<sup>9</sup> John 6:32

<sup>10</sup> Lev. 9:24

offering the sin offerings, trespass offerings, whole burnt offerings, and other sacrifices, signifying the coming of the Messiah who would come to shed his blood for his people once for all to take away sin and give them eternal life.

While these items are strange to us, they taught Israel valuable truths. As they thought about these items they should have given thanks that the eternal God had revealed himself to them alone, out of all the peoples of the earth, and given them the various sacrifices by which they drew near to God. In the words of our Confession: “all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation.”<sup>11</sup> These are valuable gifts that were given to Israel alone. They were given to no other nation, for the nations of the world walked in darkness, oblivious to the gospel—and still do. The tabernacle, its furnishings and utensils, was a singular privilege to Israel, for it marked them as belonging to God and inheriting the blessings of salvation.

Second, consider

## **2. A Grave Danger**

Regarding the sanctuary furnishings and utensils, God had specified that “the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them; *but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die*” (v. 15). These words sound rather shocking. Here were the Levites, one tribe among the twelve tribes of Israel, chosen by God to devote their lives to the service of God. The Levites needed to know that being privileged to be *close* to the holy things did not entitle them to handle them. If they did so, they would die.

When our kids were little Norma would occasionally give them fresh-baked cookies from the cookie jar. Of course the kids loved them and begged for more, but the understanding was that cookies were a special treat, not the totality of a child’s diet. But kids being kids, occasionally one of them might be caught snitching cookies out of the cookie jar. They needed to be taught that having once been given cookies as a treat did not entitle them to raid the cookie jar whenever they wanted. In a similar manner the Levites, having been given privileged access to the holy things—something no other tribe had—must not assume that they were entitled to touch them whenever they pleased. They must not touch any holy thing, “lest they die”—yes, *die!* Same with the priests. They must never touch the holy things except under the exact circumstances that God prescribed.

Again in vv. 17–20 we read that “the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ‘Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites; but do this in regard to them, *that they may live and not die* when they approach

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<sup>11</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5 ([https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter\\_07](https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_07))

the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint each of them to his service and his task. But they shall not go in to *watch* while the holy things are being covered, *lest they die*” (vv. 17–20). Notice the repetition: “lest they die . . . that they may live and not die . . . lest they die.” They must not even gaze on the holy things—no warning, no second chance. “Touch not the holy thing!” This was a lasting prohibition. Many years later, in the book of 2 Samuel, we read that Uzzah was smitten with death for putting “forth his hand to the ark of God”—and he had noble intentions!<sup>12</sup> He wanted to steady the ark, preventing it from tipping over. No matter! God had said, “If you *touch* my holy things, you will die”—and he did!

Holiness means separation. What God has separated to himself cannot be touched—even momentarily, even for a good cause. God and everything he touches is holy. Man cannot barge into his presence. He must come by invitation, and only by the mediation of Christ. If he tries to come any other way, he will die.

In modern times Christians speak of having a personal relationship with God. Yes, man, of all the creatures, was created to have a relationship with God. Yet God doesn’t say, “Hey, y’all, come over to my place and we’ll hang out. Come as you are. Sit wherever you want. Do your own thing. No special preparations necessary.” There are limits. His holiness must be respected.

Scripture says, “that they may *live* and not *die* when they approach the most holy things.” This is serious business! People *died* for touching the ark of God. In 1 Samuel 6 we read that the LORD “struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. And the men of Beth Shemesh said, ‘Who is able to *stand* before this holy LORD God?’” Indeed! Who can stand before him in his own merit?

What if you had a job that required you to work around dangerous explosives? You were a member of a bomb squad sent into a building to defuse and disarm a powerful bomb. You were an expert in your field. You had undergone extensive training. You were in possession of the necessary tools. But you had been fully informed that one misstep could mean instant death.

Or maybe you were an electrician working on high-voltage power lines. You were an expert on your job, but you knew that one mistake—one touch—could mean instant death by electrocution.

God is not trying to be a micromanager and take away people’s joy. Whatever he does, he does for his glory and our good. He knows that we all are naturally curious. Like a parent saying don’t look at the Christmas presents. And we promise but try to sneak a look when nobody’s looking.

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Sam. 6:1–11

God desires our fellowship but doesn't want us to become overly familiar. We are not peers. He is God and we are not. He has a wonderful future planned for us, but we must always come on his terms. We need to respect his holiness. We need to know the meaning of our creatureliness. We don't naturally know that.

### **3. A Lifelong Pursuit**

The Bible says: "Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise"—but we need to remember that we are creatures. We are invited to draw near in full assurance of faith, but we must always come only on his terms, through the Mediator, Christ Jesus.

Now, under the new covenant, we can enter into the Holy of holies: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19)—but *only* by the blood of Jesus.

Only Israel, of all the peoples of the earth, had the amazing blessing of the Tabernacle—including the ark of the covenant, God's very throne—right in their midst. But Israel had to learn the basic Creator-creature distinction.

God has a wonderful plan for us. His plan is for us to *be holy, as he is holy*. But since we fail in ourselves, he has given us his Son, the Holy One, who has accomplished holiness in our place. "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:15–16).

The priests and Levites were not holy in themselves. Only the priests (Aaron and his two sons—later there were more) were permitted to go into the tent of meeting when it was set up. When it was time to move, the priests covered up the furniture and put in the carrying poles. Then the Levites could come and pick it up, but they must never touch the holy things themselves, or they would die. Only the high priest could go into the most holy place, the inner room of the tent of meeting, and only on one day a year, and never without blood. There was one high priest, Aaron, and his two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, who could go into the holy place. Later, there would be more. But they could not just waltz into the tent of meeting whenever they felt like it and say, "Woohoo! I am one of the privileged few who can go into the tent of meeting—it's my property!"

Aaron, Eleazar and Ithamar were not allowed to have contact with the holy things—to actually touch the table of showbread, the altar of incense, the curtain that led into the holy of holies, and the ark of the covenant with its mercy seat—because they personally *merited* it. They were sinners and would remain sinners until the day they died. They could not have contact with the things of God because of their own personal merit or goodness. The only reason for which they could touch the tabernacle furniture was because they, by faith, were clothed with the

righteousness of Christ, just as their forefather Abraham, who “believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”<sup>13</sup>

Here, then, are (1) a singular privilege; (2) a grave danger; (3) a lifelong pursuit, which is ours as well. God is holy. His holiness is to be treated with the utmost care and reverence. We who love Christ are to “pursue . . . holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”<sup>14</sup> Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> Gen. 15:6

<sup>14</sup> Heb. 12:14