

The Hymns We Sing
Sermons on the Great Hymns
Holy, Holy, Holy

With Study Questions

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Holy, Holy, Holy

Revelation 4:1-11

This very popular hymn was written in 1826 by Reginald Heber. The focus of the hymn is the Trinity.

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee*

**But I will sing of Your power; yes, I will sing aloud of Your
mercy in the morning; for You have been my defense and refuge
in the day of my trouble (Psalm 59:16).**

God's Primacy

There are many references in Scripture to seeking God in the morning, praising God in the morning, etc. Verses such as these are often used as an encouragement to pursue morning devotions. And although morning devotions may be a very good practice (though for some who don't think well in the morning or who have little children this particular discipline is not quite as easy), the idea of praising or seeking God in the morning is symbolic more of His primacy in all events and categories in our lives.

In the above Psalm it was David's wife who had actually helped him escape from Saul, but David acknowledges God as His defense and refuge before he acknowledges those who God uses. Similarly David had recognized that in his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba was primarily a sin against God (2 Samuel 12:13).

Our First Response

Our first response to any event, trial, joy, or difficulty in our lives should be to consider God's ordained hand and purpose. It was this that gave Joseph his great faithfulness regarding the evil deeds of his brothers. I can have the great peace of recognizing that events and people have no power over my life other than what my Father in heaven has ordained (John 19:10). This is not to say that I should not respond and, if necessary, confront the evil I see. But it is to say that I can acknowledge that my whole life is operating under the providential hand of God. There are very few greater sources of peace than this knowledge.

*Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*

Since these verses are repeated at the end of the hymn we shall address them later.

*Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea*

Giving God His Due

The casting down of the golden crowns is clearly a reference to Revelation 4:10 where the elders are casting their golden crowns down before the throne of God. These crowns (stephanos) are the kinds of crowns that would be a reward for righteousness versus a crown of royalty (diadem). And since every good and perfect gift comes from above (James 1:17), the elders cast their crowns likely acknowledging their own righteousness as a gift from God.

We might, and should, enjoy whatever levels of goodness we might achieve here and in glory; the chronic problem of humanity is the demand to take credit for the achieved goodness. I can enjoy a meal without having to take credit for having prepared it. I might even enjoy preparing it. But without my God-given arms, hands, eyes, ingredients, and will to prepare it, I wouldn't enjoy cooking. It is a worthy endeavor for the Christian to learn how to draw no lines when it comes to acknowledging the things that have God as their source.

*Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who was, and is, and evermore shall be.*

Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:2, 3)

Cover Faces and Feet

These powerful creatures give us a glimpse of the holiness of God. It is not merely that God is sinless; they are sinless as well. It is the holiness of God. This incidentally is the only attribute of God we see raised to the third level of repetition in Scripture. God is transcendent and separate from His creation to the extent that these sinless creatures cover their faces and feet due to the holiness of God's presence. May God grant us vision to see that the whole earth is full of His glory.

*Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide Thee,
Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see*

But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." ²¹And the Lord said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. ²² So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. ²³ Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:20-23).

Levels of God's Hidden-ness

Even the holy man Moses could only see the glory of God from the back. There are levels of the hidden-ness of God. The unbeliever, despite their many references to God, can't see God at all (2 Corinthians 4:4). The Christian sees only through a mirror dimly but will one day see face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Bad Antennas – General Revelation

We must keep in mind that the darkness which hides God from us is the darkness of our sinful hearts. As we shall see momentarily, the creation of God declares the glory of God quite clearly. The problem is neither the source, nor the medium; it is the receiver. If you have a problem with your satellite television, there may be problems at the station, or there may be a storm, or there may be a loose connection somewhere in your house. When it comes to God's revelation there is a problem somewhere in us, our antennas are rusted with sin.

*Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.*

**"Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?
¹² You stretched out Your right hand; the earth swallowed them.
¹³ You in Your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided *them* in Your strength to Your holy habitation (Exodus 15:11-13).**

Incomparable Starting Point

A common theme, especially in the Old Testament, is the incomparability of God. We might take serious stock in the nature of that thing we consider most important or weighty in our lives. What is your starting point by which

you measure all things? Is it, as with many Christians today, your own ability to reason? Is it earthly authorities or disciplines such as science or philosophy?

Alpha and Omega

Our ability to reason is valuable; as are earthly authorities and disciplines. But the source and reliability of my own reason, or any philosophy or scientific method is dependent upon the pre-condition of something else. These things are not self-evident or self-creating. Only God is eternal, self-existent, all-knowing and perfect in power, love, purity, etc. He is the starting place of all things, maintains all things, and He is the goal of all things. He is the Alpha and Omega and no one, or thing, stands beside Him.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

Oh, give ear, Shepherd of Israel, Thou who dost lead Joseph like a flock; Thou who art enthroned *above* the cherubim, shine forth! Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up Thy power, and come to save us! O God, restore us, and cause Thy face to shine *upon us*, and we will be saved (Psalm 80:1-3--NASB).

Power to Save

The author starts the hymn (repeated here) with a declaration of God's almighty power. God's ability to do what He wills to do (especially when it comes to saving souls) is continually under attack and should never be underestimated or under-proclaimed, lest we begin to worship a God who is no God at all. Almighty God has the power to save and exercises that power according to His own good pleasure.

All Thy works shall praise Thy Name, in earth, and sky, and sea

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. ²Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. ³*There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard.*⁴Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

Not Discursive Knowledge

I have discussed earlier the general revelation of God in creation so I won't speak of it here. The Scriptures affirm that men know there is a God for God has revealed it to them and in them through what has been made

(Romans 1:19). And, over and against our evidentialist friends, this is not a knowledge which comes discursively. In other words, it isn't a matter of looking at the heavens, then logically deducing through some cosmological induction that there must be a God. The knowledge of God is revealed through creation prior to any human deduction. We don't *come to* know through creation; we know through creation.

*Holy, holy, holy; merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*

The Trinity

Finally we reach the main point of the hymn – the Trinity. The Trinity is one of those doctrines of such a critical nature that it separates true churches from false churches. Many within Christendom would agree with this doctrine but it is often misunderstood and few know why it is so critical.

A brief definition would be in order. The Westminster Confession II, 3 states,

In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, having one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father exists. He is not generated and does not come from any source. The Son is eternally generated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit eternally comes from the Father and Son.

Bad Illustrations

The Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit; never the reverse. The trinity is not like an egg (yoke, albumin, and shell), it is not like a man (father, son, brother). These illustrations not only fall short but promote the heresy of modalism! The Trinity is three in person, yet one in essence; essence being things like mind, power, and will – these are all the same. In terms of persons they are distinct. The Father is not a man like Jesus, etc. There are distinctions in the personhood of the trinity which are quite important. We will touch on these briefly as we close.

The Deity of God

Since there is little doubt, as to the importance, and truthfulness, of the Father being God, I will speak only briefly on it. He is the infinite, immense,

¹ Sometimes God is the Son sometimes He's the Father.

eternal, invisible, wise, holy God and judge. He has created all things by Himself and for Himself. When Adam fell, in a certain sense, God, being Holy, could no longer look upon Him. Pure holiness and goodness can have no unity with sin.

The Deity of Christ

Why is it important that Jesus be God? If Jesus were merely a man or merely God he could not be the link between man and God. Christ was the mediator. A mediator must be able to fully represent both sides of the mediation. If Jesus were an angel He could not represent either side. Add to this that the punishment for sin was an eternal punishment which no created being could bear for himself let alone for someone else.

The Deity of the Spirit

And perhaps the most confusing of all; why is it important to acknowledge God the Spirit? J. I. Packer states,

If, therefore, the ministry of Christ the Comforter was important, the ministry of the Holy Spirit the Comforter can scarcely be less important. If the work that Christ did matters to the church, the work that the Spirit does must matter also. Important! Why, were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit there would be no gospel, no faith, no church, no Christianity in the world at all?²

Without God the Spirit there would be no gospel (good news) for there would be no New Testament (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit was not a prophet but the prophets spoke being moved by the Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Without God the Spirit there would be no faith or new birth.

And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰ of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹ of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged" (John 16:8).

Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16 saying, **"He will care for you,"** in effect, **"in the way that I have cared for you."** Truly a remarkable person! God's Spirit is the power of His action. And the power and authority of the Spirit is what humanity is utterly dependent upon for any knowledge of God or reconciliation with God. Thomas Adams stated,

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God—20th Anniversary Edition*, (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) 1993.

In election we behold God the Father choosing; in vocation, God the Son teaching; in justification, God the Holy Ghost sealing; in salvation, the whole Deity crowning.

This, at very least, should cause us to re-think the fast and loose ways people refer to the work of the Spirit in their lives – often comparing Him to what could be mistaken for cognac or Prozac.

The Fullness of God

It was God the Father who sent His Son who died as a satisfaction for God's justice who rose again and sent His Spirit that the plan of the Father and the work of the Son might be applied to humanity. The Trinity, and nothing less, grants us the full picture of God's might and His mercy.

Questions for Study

1. What does it mean to seek God in the morning (page 2)?
2. How is it comforting to recognize God's primacy in all events (page 2)?
3. Why do you suppose the elders were casting down their golden crowns before his throne (page 3)?
4. In what respect is God hidden (page 4)?
5. Why is God's glory hidden from men (page 4)?
6. What does God's creation make clear, even though men can't see it (page 4)?
7. What are some things that men seek to put on a par with, or above, God (page 5)?
8. Is the knowledge of God in General Revelation discursive? Explain (pages 5, 6).
9. Explain why the Trinity is such an important doctrine in Christianity (pages 6, 7).