

4. The Holiness of God

“To hallow God’s name is to know, to worship, and to love the ineffable being who bears it. It is also to know, to worship and to love his adorable will every moment and all that it does, regarding all that happens as so many **veils, shadows, and nuances** beneath which this eternal and most holy will is always active.”¹

--Caussade

Psalm 99

¹ The LORD reigns,
let the nations tremble;
he sits enthroned between the cherubim,
let the earth shake.

² Great is the LORD in Zion;
he is exalted over all the nations.

³ Let them praise your great and awesome name—
he is holy.

⁴ The King is mighty, he loves justice—
you have established equity;
in Jacob you have done
what is just and right.

⁵ *Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his footstool;
he is holy.*²

--Author Unknown



Psalm 99 is one of the great hymns celebrating the Enthronement of Yahweh, that is, the recognition by the people of Israel that God is King of earth and heaven. This hymn has three irregular strophes; the first two are given above: vss. 1-3 and vss. 4-5. The last, vss 6-9, sings of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel appealing to the Lord and, wonder of wonders, the Lord God answers them. But why not? God has chosen Israel to be the bearer of His Name. This weak people are His people. The people in turn celebrate this grace of God; even the surrounding nations speak of the power and majesty of Yahweh.

¹ Caussade, [Abandonment to Divine Providence](#), p. 51. The emphasis is mine.

² Psalm 99 is a royal psalm highlighting the holiness and justice of the King of Israel, consisting of three stanzas, two of which are in this reading: vss. 1-3 and 4-5. The third stanza comes at the end of this meditation. In this instance the King is the Lord God.

It is clear that Israel is borne along by divine grace and the wonder of the voice that speaks from the cloud:

*⁷ He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud;
they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.³*

What did God speak? He spoke words of forgiveness. The last stanza reflects the peoples' cry for pardon from sin and God agrees. They have sinned but have confessed, and God forgives.

Hallowing God's Name

Psalm 99 speaks of the mystery of God. Early in God's dealings with Israel He covenanted primarily with the people as a whole. The blessings of God were given to members of the nation. Gradually across the years the Lord God called specific people to make His will known and to be leaders of the people to help them fulfill God's will. By the time of the prophets the Lord made His Word known to members of the nation. There was recognition of the individuality of the people and each person had to answer to God for his or her sins. Our Lord Jesus spoke of hallowing God's Name in what we now call "The Lord's Prayer."

*"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven."⁴*

Our Lord coupled the words "hallow" and "will." Did you notice that? Causade also picked up on that and helps us see its deeper meaning for our lives. To "hallow" God's Name, that is, to treat a thing, in this case a Name, with the thought of reverence, sacredness, and holiness. The "Name" signifies the identity, life, and presence of the Lord God. In the Old Testament, names did not confine a person to a particular understanding, but helped them dig deeper into the meaning of God, especially as He called them to meditation and prayer. Thus, Causade calls us to "know" God, in the sense that God reveals Himself to us and enables us to say that we know God, or that we know the

³ Psalm 99, NIV.

⁴ Matthew 6:9-10, NIV.

Lord Jesus. We are talking about a spiritual knowing, a knowing of the heart, a sense of certainty without the ability to prove it. Yet there He is, the living Lord God who is calling me to do all I can to make His Name holy, set apart, and to do what He wants me to do, that is, His will.

I am disturbed by the freedom with which we hear actors, authors, and conversations that freely blaspheme the holy Name of God, the King of Israel and Father of Jesus Christ. Caussade is right when he says we should not only know God, but we are called “to worship and to love” God. We can hardly do that if we take His Name in vain or grow lax in the way we handle His Name. Think for a moment. Would we use God’s Name in a curse or foolish way before our mother or when talking about our spouse? Of course not. I am quite serious about this. It is chilling to think that God’s Name is used so flippantly in motion pictures. Every time that movie is shown, that treatment of God comes back on that actor or actress again. We are called to worship God, to love God, to serve God, to think of God in the depths of our hearts, especially in our constant prayers.

I realize that Christian witness must adapt itself to the changing social climate of our nation. I heard someone snap back with this comment on hearing that we Christians are to live like Jesus: “Well, do you mean we are to wear sandals?” Hardly, but I would not go as far as some ministers I know who, trying to appeal to the modern mind, tell off-color jokes, for example. Just one of the guys, you know. It is difficult enough to witness to folks about the Lord without our trying to confuse people with our conversation. If we worship God and love Him, we will speak of Him with kindness and reverence. I suggest that your language should be the kind you would use in prayer.

Beyond Description

Caussade refers to God as “the ineffable being.” What does he mean? We do not use ineffable in our daily conversations, yet it is a good word. Ineffable means that something is incapable of being expressed, something unutterable. When Caussade says God is ineffable he means that God cannot be described, that the essence of God cannot be known or expressed by mere human language. How would you describe God? Do you think God is ineffable? I met a woman in Rome who would not mention the word “God” in her conversation. She would say “Blessed be He” instead. Why? Because to

her the divine Name was not to be pronounced by humans. She didn't correct me when I did but in a kindly way she made her point: God is holy and majestic. How is such a one to be spoken of by human beings? In one sense we can't; the woman was right.

Psalm 99 is a psalm of joy. Did you get that tone when you read it? Yes, a psalm of joy and happiness. To sing that God is holy is a joy of the heart because it is a confession of how we approach our blessed Lord. The first hymn in my denomination's hymn-book is a hymn of great joy and energy: "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing."⁵ The writer senses that it would take a thousand tongues, at least, to "sing my great Redeemer's praise." I can see the great congregation in the Temple in Jerusalem singing Psalm 99. How happy they would be to sing out the praise of God. Charles Wesley's hymn, like Psalm 99, is also a song of witness. No wonder it has a happy tune, especially when we lift our voices with "the glories of my God and King."

There is a truth here that if we can grasp it, we will be miles down the road in understanding more about God. It has been a common misconception to think of God as a white-haired, white-bearded, old man. Not weak, mind you, but a man of wisdom filled with power and authority. His stern face makes us hesitant to approach Him as father, or especially as gentle mother. That image of the Divine One is shot through with error. The primary fault with that kind of thinking is that God is a "being," no matter how grand. I am a being, especially when compared with other beings, other people. As a human being, I occupy a certain amount of space; have a certain amount of strength, and have a certain amount of knowledge, and so on. God is not limited by any of those things because God is not a being to be compared with other beings, no matter how grand. The Scripture does occasionally speak of God's hand, His limitless might, His face, but these are poetic expressions, not for comparison with human hands or faces.

The Holiness Code

The Book of Leviticus is concerned with the conduct of the people of Israel with regard to what is clean and unclean in the celebration of the religious rites concerning blood sacrifice. The heart of Leviticus is what is known as the Holiness Code. In this

⁵ The United Methodist Hymnal, #57.

brief code, which reads as follows, Yahweh's holiness as the God of Israel is established at the beginning of the story of creation.

⁴⁴ I am the LORD your God, and you must dedicate yourselves to me and be holy, just as I am holy....⁴⁵ I brought you out of Egypt so that I could be your God. Now you must become holy, because I am holy!⁶

In the account of creation, the word "divide" is prominent, as in God divided the light from the darkness and saw it was good. Thus, Yahweh is separated from what He creates, that is, God is "holy," separated for religious use. God is different, morally different, hence morally superior and Lawgiver. God's holiness is protected by prohibitions and affirmations as we see in Psalm 8. The mystery of God's moral holiness can be shared by you and me.

Psalm 8

The Glory of God Sung by the Stars to Man

- 1 Our LORD and Ruler, your name is wonderful everywhere on earth!**
You let your glory be seen in the heavens above.
- 2 With praises from children and from tiny infants, you have built a fortress.**
It makes your enemies silent, and all who turn against you are left speechless.
- 3 I often think of the heavens your hands have made,**
and of the moon and stars you put in place.
- 4 Then I ask, "Why do you care about us humans?**
Why are you concerned for us weaklings?"
- 5 You made us a little lower than you yourself,**
and you have crowned us with glory and honor.
- 6 You let us rule everything your hands have made.**
And you put all of it under our power--
- 7 the sheep and the cattle,**
and every wild animal,
- 8 the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,**
and all ocean creatures.
- 9 Our LORD and Ruler,**
your name is wonderful everywhere on earth!

In the New Testament the holiness of God is established by "the precious blood of Christ, that spotless and innocent lamb." We are called to live as God's chosen ones. So

⁶ Leviticus 11:44a-45, CEV.

how do God's holy people live? Caussade says it is really quite simple. "In reality, holiness consists of one thing only: complete loyalty to God's will."⁷ It is important to understand that we are not called *to understand* God's will or *defend it*, only to obey it. Thus, one need not know theology or philosophy, simply to desire to be obedient at all times. As St. Peter says,

*¹⁵ Always live as God's holy people should, because God is the one who chose you, and he is holy. ¹⁶ That's why the Scriptures say, "I am the holy God, and you must be holy too." ¹⁷ You say that God is your Father, but God doesn't have favorites! He judges all people by what they do. So you must honor God while you live as strangers here on earth. ¹⁸ You were rescued from the useless way of life that you learned from your ancestors. But you know that you were not rescued by such things as silver or gold that don't last forever. ¹⁹ You were rescued by the precious blood of Christ, that spotless and innocent lamb.*⁸

At first, it seems as though being holy takes a lot of energy and knowledge. Not necessarily so. The ancients struggled with this just as we do. They came up with a very simple way to grasp what God wants of us. Pay close attention to the following: *The deep waters of faith are not chaotic but calm. They are navigated by a simple mind and by that mind reach the harbor of God's will.*

*"The chief part of virtue...is faith energized by love. The deep waters of faith seem turbulent when we peer into them too curiously; but when contemplated in a spirit of simplicity, they are calm. The depths of faith are like the water of Lethe, making us forget all evil; they will not reveal themselves to the scrutiny of meddlesome reasoning. Let us therefore sail these waters with simplicity of mind, and so reach the harbor of God's will."*⁹

Probably the easiest way to know what the will of God is is to read the Scripture, especially the Gospels. Therefore, deep faith (or the will of God) comes by a simple reading of the Gospel—simple, not cluttered by reason or expecting miracles—**just reading and believing and rejoicing**. Caussade would have agreed with the Orthodox spiritual father that the depths of faith act for us like the swift waters of Lethe, with its forgetful song, causing us to forget the evil that has threatened our life.¹⁰ I think that God's gift

⁷ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, p. 25.

⁸ 1 Peter 1, CEV.

⁹ St. Diadochos of Photiki, *The Philokalia*, 1, p. 258. Emphasis by italics mine.

¹⁰ Dante's mystic River Lethe, was known also as the river whose sounds made one sleepy. The ancient Roman "ghosts of the dead" (spirits like our Halloween) were required to drink from the river in order to

for many of us is that gift of simplicity by which we live and through which we will reach the harbor of safety, having escaped shipwreck.

Tomorrow's Agenda

The first five verses, sections 1 and 2 (vv. 1-3, 4-5) of Psalm 99 are on the first page of this meditation. The third section (vv. 6-9) is as follows:

- ⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel was among those who called on his name;
they called on the LORD
and he answered them.
- ⁷ He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud;
they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.
- ⁸ O LORD our God,
you answered them;
you were to Israel a forgiving God,
though you punished their misdeeds.
- ⁹ *Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his holy mountain,
for the LORD our God is holy.*

As we close out this meditation, let's take a closer look at Psalm 99, all nine verses. Since the title of our study is "The Holiness of God," let's see what we find in this psalm that pertains to a study of the holiness of God. Now, some things are obvious. For example, the ending lines of each of the three stanzas are highlighted in italics, and the reader is called to think of God as "holy." However, not only is God holy but also "his mountain." and "God's great and awesome name." What would a Hebrew poet mean when he spoke of "holy mountain?" Or what would he mean by coupling God's holy nature with His "great and awesome name?" You might have to refer to a bible dictionary for help although we have already taken a look at God's Name.

Take a close look now at each of the three stanzas, determine what is the key sentence or key idea of each stanza, write it down and see if there is any progression of thought in them. The second stanza is the shortest of the three.

forget their earthly life. Ibid.

⁴ The King is mighty, he loves justice—
you have established equity;
in Jacob you have done
what is just and right.

⁵ *Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his footstool;
he is holy.*

The King is “just” as well as
holy. “Equity” is established
on God’s nature, not on rea-
son or by common consent.
God is our authority.
Worship is related to holi-
ness; so worship is personal.
What is God’s “footstool?”

When you have completed your study, make a list detailing what you have found out about God’s holy nature. Take your findings and write your own prayer to God, “exalting” Him for who He is. Reread the meditation and see what you learn about His holy name and nature. Have you learned anything that may change the way you pray to the Father? Read Psalm 100, a magnificent short psalm, applying the methods of your study to that psalm. What have you learned about bible study (as a method) and prayer (as a personal way to address God)? By now it should be fairly obvious that good study methods produce wonderful insights into our faith. It is a joy, isn’t it, to learn key theological questions and how to ask those questions so that our faith is strengthened and deepened.

Questions to be pondered: What does Caussade mean by “veils, shadows, and nuances” and what do they mean in reference to hallowing God’s Name?

I will be back in about a week for more about Caussade and how his teachings can help make us stronger Christians. In the meantime, I hope your Thanksgiving is an especially meaningful time this year.

Peace!

--Jerry Mercer
--November 24, 2009