

Sunday, September 20, 2026 - HOLY IS HE-A YOM KIPPUR MESSAGE -Pastor John Henry Raskin

“Exalt the LORD our God...for the LORD our God is holy.” — Psalm 99:9

The Big Idea

Psalm 99 brings us into the throne room of the holy King. Yom Kippur, “The Most Holy Day” showed Israel, that sin requires atonement; Jesus fulfilled that pattern once for all. At the cross, God’s justice against sin and His mercy toward sinners meet in one perfect Israelite Who is both Mediator and sacrifice. Holy is He.

Psalm 99: Three Movements

- **Reign** — “The LORD reigns” (vv. 1–3). God is enthroned above the cherubim, great over every people, and worthy of trembling awe. The refrain is unavoidable: *He is holy*.
- **Righteousness** — “The King’s strength loves justice” (vv. 4–5). God’s power is never arbitrary. At His footstool—the ark and mercy seat—justice and mercy meet. Again: *He is holy*.
- **Relationship** — God answers those who call (vv. 6–9). Moses, Aaron, and Samuel stood in the gap, but each mediator was also a sinner in need of grace. God is both the One who forgives and the One who judges evil. The psalm closes: *the LORD our God is holy*.

The Day of Atonement

Once each year, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place with sacrificial blood (Leviticus 16). One goat died as a sin offering; the scapegoat carried Israel’s confessed sins away. Together they pictured two realities: justice satisfied and guilt removed. Yet the ceremony had to be repeated, because it covered sin temporarily and pointed beyond itself.

Jesus: Priest, Sacrifice, and God-Who-Forgives

Jesus did what no earlier mediator could do. He needed no atonement for Himself, offered His own blood, bore sin away, and entered the Most Holy Place once for all (Hebrews 9:12). At the cross, judgment fell fully on Him so that forgiveness could be permanently ours. The Christ who completed atonement was already active throughout Israel’s story—the spiritual Rock, the divine Presence, and the eternal Son.

Our Response

- **Tremble:** Do I approach God with reverent awe, recognizing His absolute holiness?
- **Stop self-mediating:** Am I resting on sincerity, attendance, or effort instead of Christ’s finished work?
- **Receive forgiveness:** If I belong to Christ, do I live as though judgment is still the final word—or as one whose sin has been borne away?
- **Trust and call:** Jesus is the perfect Intercessor. Call on Him; He still answers.

Because Jesus is our Intercessor, the Holy King is also our God-Who-Forgives. Trust Him. Call on Him.

He still answers.

Key Scriptures: Psalm 99; Isaiah 6:1–3; Exodus 25:22; 32:32; Leviticus 16; 1 Samuel 12:19, 23; 1 Corinthians 10:4; Hebrews 9:12, 26, 28; 10:1–3

HOLY IS HE – A YOM KIPPUR MESSAGE

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week we looked at Jesus' use of the 8th Psalm to silence the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew and realized that Jesus was active and present as the second person of the Trinity even as David wrote the Psalm 900 years before Christ was born.

We stressed the fact that Jesus is present throughout the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike.

We saw that the temple sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins that were part of the mosaic law were appointed by God not merely as a foreshadowing of Jesus,

but as the temporary reality of forgiveness as God's own nature before Jesus' actual birth, death and resurrection

provided the way to salvation once and for all for those who would believe in and receive Him.

As it happens, today is the actual Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the highest of the High Holy Days according to the Law of Moses.

This is the day that typifies the very concept of atonement and Blood Sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

In keeping with the theme of Jesus' actual presence in the Old Testament,

I would like us to explore the 99th Psalm on this, the Day of Atonement.

Psalm 99

1The Lord reigns;

Let the peoples tremble!

He dwells between the cherubim;

Let the earth be moved!

2 The Lord is great in Zion,

And He is high above all the peoples.

3 Let them praise Your great and awesome name—

He is holy.

4 The King's strength also loves justice;

You have established equity;

You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

5 Exalt the Lord our God,

And worship at His footstool—

He is holy.

6 Moses and Aaron were among His priests,

And Samuel was among those who called upon His name;

They called upon the Lord, and He answered them.

7 He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar;

They kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave them.

8 You answered them, O Lord our God;

You were to them God-Who-Forgives,

Though You took vengeance on their deeds.

9 Exalt the Lord our God,

And worship at His holy hill;

For the Lord our God is holy.

Let's look at how this Psalm embodies The Day of Atonement and explore why and how it still relates to us in Christ Jesus, the perfected remnant of Israel.

Imagine that you lived in Jerusalem in the years that Jesus was growing up, before the veil of the Holy of Holies was torn.

Imagine that you are visiting the Temple and it is Yom Kippur.

Once a year, on this Day, the high priest alone went behind the veil into the Most Holy Place, carrying blood that was not his own, to cover sins that were not his own, for a people who could not cover their own sins.

We don't keep this day the way Israel kept it, not because this day is not important, but because the Day it pointed toward has already come.

Still, it is worth standing this morning where Israel stood once a year — before the curtain, aware of their sin, aware of holiness, and asking whether there is any way through.

Psalm 99 puts us in exactly that place. We have just read it as a whole; now let us open it up.

Three times the psalmist breaks off to say plainly —

“He is holy” in verse 3, “He is holy” in verse 5, and “the LORD our God is holy” in verse 9.

He is Holy

He is Holy

The Lord our God is Holy

That threefold pattern is the same pattern Isaiah heard around God's throne —

Isaiah 6:3

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2

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. 3 And one cried to another and said:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!”**

In his Gospel, the apostle John tells us that Isaiah’s vision was, in fact, a vision of Christ’s glory:

Holy, Holy, Holy.

Psalm 99 is built like a throne room.

Reign. Righteousness. Relationship.

And every movement ends on the same unbearable word: **HOLY.**

Into that holiness the psalm sets three men —

Moses, Aaron, and Samuel — and one staggering title for God we don’t expect to find this close to a throne:

“The God-Who-Forgives.”

That is where we are going this morning...

The Throne room of an awesome and unapproachable Holy King.

Three imperfect mediators who nonetheless stood in the gap for a sinful people.

And a God who forgives and who, in the very same verse, “took vengeance on their deeds.”

We will see that only the Cross holds a holy, forgiving, and vengeance-taking God together in one Person and that person is Jesus.

I want to show you this morning that the One who is Holy and Who holds this psalm together was not bolted onto this psalm later.

He was already there — alive and active in it — long before He was born in the likeness of human beings in Bethlehem.

Let's begin...

Psalm 99:1

The Lord reigns;

Let the peoples tremble!

He dwells between the cherubim;

Let the earth be moved!

This psalm does not ease you in. It opens with a throne, not an invitation.

“He dwells between the cherubim” is temple language — it describes the ark of the covenant, covered by the mercy seat, inside the Holy of Holies.

God's footstool, the place where His Presence dwells on earth.

This is the place where the cherubim's wings overshadowed the space where atonement was made once a year on this very day. (Exodus 25:22; Leviticus 16:2).

If you remember when we talked about the two trees in the Garden of Eden, the cherubim are those awesome angels that the Lord ordained to guard the tree of life from sinful man.

These same cherubim were represented above the mercy seat and only the high priest could enter once a year on Yom Kippur and only after being ritually sanctified.

The psalmist is not writing devotional poetry about a distant deity. This is the Lord of the Universe who dwells in the Holy of Holies.

He is describing the exact geography of the Day of Atonement — the place, the throne and the mercy seat itself.

The appropriate response to God's Presence is trembling awe.

Not the casual familiarity we sometimes bring to God, but the response of people who understand that between the cherubim sits a Holy King who "reigns" whether the nations acknowledge it or not.

Psalm 99:2

**2 The Lord is great in Zion,
And He is high above all the peoples.**

This is not a local deity contending with other local deities; this is the King of the whole earth, seated over Israel, but not confined to Israel.

Psalm 99:3

**Let them praise Your great and awesome name
He is holy."**

Before we ever reach Moses, Aaron, or Samuel... before we ever hear the word "forgives" we first need to acknowledge and feel the weight of his Holiness.

The God who forgives is not a soft deity who foregoes holiness for the sake of relationship.

He is enthroned, He reigns, He is holy, and only then does the psalmist dare speak of mercy. Holy is He.

The word in Hebrew for Holy is Kadosh.

The Hebrew word conveys absolute separateness: set apart, wholly other, unapproachable, and entirely self-sufficient.

There is none other Who is by His very nature, Holy.

He is also gracious and merciful.

Every mercy this psalm will describe is mercy shown by a God who does not stop being Kadosh, Holy, in order to show it.

Psalm 99:4

**4 The King's strength also loves justice;
You have established equity;
You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.**

This holy King is not arbitrary.

His strength “loves justice” — this is not power exercised for its own sake, but power that delights in what is right.

He has “established equity” and “executed justice and righteousness in Jacob,” meaning His own covenant people are not exempt from His righteous rule.

If anything, they are the first place His justice is applied.

The use of “Jacob” rather than “Israel” here is telling.

Jacob the deceiver was renamed Israel, which means “God perseveres” by God to be a blessing to the nations and to display His holiness.

When Israel as a people fell short of their purpose it was sin to them and the psalm says God “executed justice upon them”.

And then we come to verse 5:

Psalm 99:5

**5 Exalt the Lord our God,
And worship at His footstool—
He is holy.**

The footstool that the psalmist refers to is the Ark of the Covenant, never to be opened, covered by the Mercy Seat.

The psalmist keeps circling back to the one sacred physical object in the tabernacle where the blood of animals was sprinkled once a year, where a holy God who loves justice met a sinful people and did not destroy them.

The Ark was sitting there in the very heart of the Temple, in the place where God's Presence dwells as a standing claim: justice and mercy will meet in this exact place.

That is what the Day of Atonement is about.

Psalm 99:6

**Moses and Aaron were among His priests,
And Samuel was among those who called upon His name;
They called upon the Lord, and He answered them.**

Here, the psalm turns from God's throne to Israel's history, and it names names.

Not generic worshipers — Moses, Aaron, and Samuel.

Three men across roughly four centuries of Israel's history, tied together here as a single category: people who called on the LORD, and He answered.

Start with Moses. When Israel had just broken the covenant at Sinai — building a golden calf in the very shadow of the mountain where God had forbidden idolatry —

the LORD told Moses to step aside so He could destroy the nation and start over with Moses alone (Exodus 32:9–10).

Moses refused the offer. He went back up the mountain and said to the Lord,

Exodus 32:32

32 Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.

This is not casual intercession. This is a man offering to be cut off himself in the place of a guilty people.

Moses stood exactly where this psalm places him... between the holy throne and the trembling nation — and he could not close that gap by himself. He could only ask that God forgive.

Then there is Aaron.

He is named as high priest, and on the Day of Atonement specifically, Aaron does what no other Israelite is permitted to do:

he alone enters the Most Holy Place, past the cherubim, with the sacrificial blood of one of two goats

— first for the covering of his own sin, and then for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:11–15).

Then he lays his hands on the second goat, the scapegoat, and confesses over it “all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins,”

sending it away into the wilderness, bearing those sins where they will never be found again (Leviticus 16:21–22).

Aaron is the mediator who literally, physically, carries sin out of the camp.

Yet Aaron himself needed the same blood applied to himself first. He was a sinner, atoning as a sinner, for sinners.

Then Samuel — prophet, priest, and judge, standing at the very end of the era of the Judges.

When Israel demanded a king and Samuel warned them it would go badly, and it did, the people begged him, “Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, that we may not die.”

Samuel answered them with a sentence that I and every pastor should tremble to say honestly:

“Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:19, 23).

To stop interceding, Samuel says, would itself be a sin. That is how seriously Scripture takes the office of standing in the gap.

Here is what I want you to see: all three of these men were themselves sinners.

Moses struck the rock in anger and was barred from the Promised Land for it (Numbers 20:10–12).

Aaron built the golden calf with his own hands (Exodus 32:2–4).

Samuel’s own sons “did not walk in his ways,” and Israel used their corruption as an excuse to reject Samuel’s house altogether (1 Samuel 8:3–5).

Every mediator that this psalm names was himself in need of a mediator.

That is not incidental to the psalm — it is the whole point the psalm is quietly setting up.

Psalm 99:7

**He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar;
They kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave them.**

I love the kindness of this phrase...

“He spoke to them in the cloudy pillar; they kept His testimonies and the ordinance He gave them.”

These intercessors, themselves sinners, encountered God’s very Presence and tried to keep His testimonies and commands — but always imperfectly, partially, and by grace, not by merit.

Moses, Aaron, and Samuel intercede, and it works, not because they are righteous enough to bridge the gap,

but because a righteous God chooses, for a time, to answer flawed intercessors on behalf of a flawed people.

That arrangement was never meant to be the final word. It was a shadow, and shadows are cast by something standing in the light.

Verse 8 is where the whole psalm turns on a hinge, that most people read right past:

Psalm 99:8

**You answered them, O Lord our God;
You were to them God-Who-Forgives,
Though You took vengeance on their deeds.**

The God Who Forgives. In Hebrew, “El Nasa” from the root which means to forgive, “to lift, to carry, to bear away.”

It is the same verb used of the scapegoat bearing away Israel’s iniquity on Yom Kippur in Leviticus.

He is the God who Himself bears sins away.

Here is the tension the entire Day of Atonement exists to manage, stated in a single sentence:

God forgave them, AND God took vengeance on their deeds...

not “forgave some, avenged others,” but the same God, toward the same people, in the same breath.

Two Hebrew words for one God

El Nasa: the God who bore their sin away.

El Naqam: The God who still took vengeance on what they did.

Hold both of those at once without a mediator and you will either soften God’s holiness to make room for forgiveness, or soften His forgiveness to protect His holiness.

Israel could not actually resolve this, which is precisely why the Day of Atonement had to be repeated year after year (Hebrews 10:1–3).

It was a yearly reminder that sin had been covered, not removed; that Moses, Aaron, and Samuel could intercede, but none of them could make both halves of Psalm 99, verse 8 permanently true at once.

This is also where the two goats of The Day of Atonement referenced in Leviticus 16 make sense together.

One goat was slaughtered as a sin offering, its blood carried into the Most Holy Place by the High Priest and sprinkled on the mercy seat itself — God’s earthly Footstool — to satisfy what God’s justice, His vengeance, His Naqam in verse 8, required.

The other goat, the scapegoat, was not killed but sent away alive into the wilderness, carrying Israel's confessed sin... the Nasa, the "bearing away," of verse 8.

Two goats, because the picture needed a death that satisfies justice and a removal that accomplishes forgiveness, and no single animal, no single man, could do both.

Now hear the Gospel!

Christ did not need two goats.

He was, in one human being, the goat whose blood satisfies justice and the goat who carries sin away, never to be charged again (Hebrews 9:26, 28).

The two halves of verse 8 that Israel needed an entire ceremonial system to hold together, Christ held together in a single, finished act. That is the Day of Atonement, finished, at the Cross...

not because the pattern was wrong, but because the pattern was always waiting for a Priest who would not also need atonement for Himself, and a sacrifice who would not need to be replaced next year. Hebrews tells us what Jesus did...

Hebrews 9:12

12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

Moses offered to be blotted out of the Book of Life and was refused.

Christ offered the sacrifice of Himself and was not refused.

Here is what I do not want you to miss today:

The Christ who finished the Day of Atonement at the Cross was not absent in the 99th Psalm.

He was already present, already active, in the events this psalm describes.

Paul tells the Corinthians that Israel in the wilderness “drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4).

The same generation Moses interceded for was already being sustained by the pre-incarnate Son of God.

Verse 7 of this psalm says God “spoke to them in the cloudy pillar”., This was the very pillar that led Israel by day and stood as a wall between them and Pharaoh’s army (Exodus 14:19–20),

This was the presence that filled the tabernacle so thickly that Moses himself could not enter it (Exodus 40:34–35).

Scripture elsewhere calls this manifest presence “the Angel of the LORD” — one who speaks with the authority of God, who bears the name of God, who is worshiped as God, yet is spoken of as distinct from God the Father. (Exodus 3:2–6; Judges 13:20–22).

Many highly regarded readers of Scripture, across the centuries, have recognized in these appearances, the Son of God making Himself known before His incarnation.

If that identification holds, then the very voice that answered Moses from the pillar, the very Presence that stood behind Aaron in the Most Holy Place, that spoke to Samuel in the night at Shiloh (1 Samuel 3), was indeed the eternal Son —

already active, already doing the work of mediating between a Holy God and a covenant people, centuries before Bethlehem.

Psalm 99:9

9 Exalt the Lord our God, And worship at His holy hill;

For the Lord our God is holy.

The psalm ends where it began, with His holiness, but everything in between has changed about how we hear that word.

This is not the holiness of a God we cannot approach.

This is the holiness of the God who answered Moses, met Aaron in the tabernacle, spoke to Samuel by name, and ultimately was made flesh and dwelled among us to become both our High Priest and our sacrifice.

So, on this day set apart for atonement, ask yourself honestly what you are truly resting on.

Some of you are still trying to be your own Moses — pleading your case before God on the strength of your own sincerity, your own attendance, your own efforts to keep His “testimonies and ordinances.”

That will not hold.

Moses himself could not hold it; he needed grace as much as the people he interceded for.

Some of you know exactly what you have done, and you are still living under the second half of verse 8 as though God’s vengeance might still be the last word for you.

Please know that it is not, if you belong to Christ.

The vengeance already fell. It fell on Him.

Once, fully, so that the first half of verse 8 could be permanently, unshakably yours: El Nasa, the God-Who-Forgives.

There is no version of Day of Atonement faith that skips the trembling and awe of verse 1 and goes straight to your comfort.

But there is also no honest reading of the 99th Psalm that leaves you at the trembling.

The same holy King who made the earth move at His reign is the King who answered flawed men when they called, and who Himself has become the perfect Mediator

He did what only He could do, so that you would never have to wonder whether your intercessor might fail like Moses did or need atoning for, like Aaron did.

If your intercessor is Jesus, He is also the God Who Forgives.

Trust Him. Call on Him. He still answers.