BEYOND BELIEF: EXPLORING THE CHARACTER OF GOD
Start by believing. Then go beyond belief.

The Digital Age has produced huge amounts of information that have radically advanced human learning. The amount of knowledge available to us is mind-numbing. In fact, information is multiplying so rapidly that textbooks, how-to manuals, and even daily newspapers seem perpetually outdated. But what do we know about God? Are we advancing as rapidly in our knowledge of Him?

People have used the explosion of social media primarily to inform friends and others about themselves and their lives. Therefore, we know more about one another, but do we really know one another? There’s a big difference between the two. The same is true when it comes to our relationship with God. We can learn more and more about God by studying His Word, but we also need to know Him in order for our lives to be changed.

That is why this study, “Beyond Belief,” is so important. “Beyond Belief” seeks to help us increase our knowledge of God by studying His character and moral attributes. But we don’t want to just know about God; we want to know Him more intimately.

We could spend a lifetime studying the character and attributes of God revealed in the Bible and still only begin to scratch the surface of understanding the sovereign God of all creation. Therefore, the sessions in this study will focus on six major attributes of God: God’s holiness, God’s love, God’s justice, God’s forgiveness, God’s wisdom, and God’s faithfulness.

As we begin to understand what God is like and how He works in our lives, we will not only know God more, but we also learn about ourselves and who we are in Christ.

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SESSION 1

GOD IS HOLY
The Point
God’s holiness calls me to be holy.

The Bible Meets Life
Every culture has some religious element, but each culture makes God in its own image. That god tends not to be too different from the people who worship it; there is nothing unique about their god. We desperately need a God who is beyond us; we need a God who is beyond our ability to fully explain or understand Him. That God has revealed Himself. He is holy—completely separate from His creation—yet He calls us to know Him and walk with Him.

The Passage
Psalm 99:1-9

The Setting
The holiness and sovereignty of God is the theme of Psalm 99. The psalm can be divided into three divisions, and each division concludes with the exclamation of God’s holiness. Psalm 99 not only declares the holiness of God, but it describes His holiness in light of His righteous and just character. The psalm shows us how God demonstrates His holiness. As one of the enthronement psalms (Pss. 93-100), it affirms God’s rule over the earth.
Psalm 99:1-9  (HCSB)

1 The LORD reigns! Let the peoples tremble. He is enthroned above the cherubim. Let the earth quake.

2 Yahweh is great in Zion; He is exalted above all the peoples.

3 Let them praise Your great and awe-inspiring name. He is holy.

4 The mighty King loves justice. You have established fairness; You have administered justice and righteousness in Jacob.

5 Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at His footstool. He is holy.

6 Moses and Aaron were among His priests; Samuel also was among those calling on His name. They called to Yahweh and He answered them.

7 He spoke to them in a pillar of cloud; they kept His decrees and the statutes He gave them.

8 LORD our God, You answered them. You were a forgiving God to them, an avenger of their sinful actions.

9 Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at His holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.

Key Words

Cherubim (v. 1)—Cherubim are angelic creatures who serve God. Two golden images of cherubim sat atop the ark in the most holy place of the temple.

Holy (vv. 3, 5, 9)—The term refers to someone or something set apart from life’s common aspects. God is set above creation and is perfect in every way.

Pillar of cloud (v. 7)—God sometimes made His presence known to His people as they journeyed with a pillar of cloud. Here He spoke from such a cloud.
GET INTO THE STUDY

**DISCUSS:** Question #1 on page 9 of the PSG: “When have you seen or experienced something you would describe as one-of-a-kind?”

**ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL):** Print out descriptions of rare (one-of-a-kind) items from Sotheby’s or another auction house. Post these descriptions on the walls where your group is meeting, or pass them around to group members to enhance the discussion.

**GUIDE:** Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 10 of the PSG. Introduce the concept of holiness by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

**GUIDE:** Call attention to “The Point” at the top of page 10 of the PSG: “God’s holiness calls me to be holy.”

**ENHANCEMENT:** Use Pack Item 1, “Beyond Belief,” to introduce the major theme of this study, along with the specific focus of each session.

**Note:** If you’re not able to display posters from the Leader Pack, consider passing them around the group as a visual aid.

**PRAY:** Transition into the Bible study by thanking God for His Word. Invite the Holy Spirit to prepare the hearts of every participant, including your own, and to offer guidance and conviction as you explore the topic of holiness.

**TIP:** When helpful, use this “Notes” column to record additional discussion questions, concepts, and activities that connect the study content with your specific group.
Psalm 99:1-3

1 The LORD reigns! Let the peoples tremble. He is enthroned above the cherubim. Let the earth quake. 2 Yahweh is great in Zion; He is exalted above all the peoples. 3 Let them praise Your great and awe-inspiring name. He is holy.

READ: Psalm 99:1-3 on page 11 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer from the group to do so.

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the key themes from page 12 of the PSG:

1. God is holy.

2. Though we are like God, God is not like us.

3. God is worthy of our praise and glory.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 12 of the PSG: “When was a time God’s holiness became real to you?”

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity “Picturing Holiness” on page 13 of the PSG. If time permits, ask for a few volunteers to share which images they selected and explain how they represent holiness.

Choose one of the images in the PSG, then record what it means to strive for holiness in that specific area of life:

______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

TRANSITION: Let’s continue exploring Psalm 99 to explore what it means to describe God as “holy.”
Psalm 99:1-3 Commentary

Psalm 99 is one of several psalms known as enthronement psalms because of the opening words, the Lord reigns. The word order is emphatic in the Hebrew, placing the covenant name for God—Yahweh or the Lord—ahead of the verb rather than behind as usual. As a result of God’s reign, the psalmist said, Let the peoples tremble. A proper understanding of divine sovereignty results in people acknowledging God’s superiority. Reverential fear, the meaning of tremble in this verse, is the legitimate response of created beings to the overwhelming majesty of their Creator. God is separate from and above all creation.

God decreed that craftsmen make two cherubim to oversee the ark in the most holy place (Ex. 25:18-22). These golden images represented angelic servants of God in heaven. God’s people understood the Lord was in the most holy place enthroned above the cherubim. The command to let the earth quake refers to a metaphorical yet nonetheless real attitude of awe and respect for the one true God.

The psalmist next spoke of God’s greatness. He is great in Zion, the land of God’s people, particularly Jerusalem. Once again the covenant name, Yahweh, comes first in Hebrew for emphasis. Lest anyone get the notion Zion is the only purview of God’s greatness, the psalmist added, He is exalted above all the peoples. The form of the verb exalted emphasizes the on-going act of “being exalted.” Thus at no time in history is any people above the Lord.

The psalmist called for earth’s peoples to praise God’s great and awe-inspiring name. Notice the transition from the third person references about the Lord in 99:1-2, to the second person direct address in 99:3a, Your great and awe-inspiring name. This shift from speaking about God to talking with Him seems to indicate the psalmist himself was caught up in the awe inspired by God’s name. The phrase awe-inspiring renders a single Hebrew verb meaning “to be feared.” Once again, this “fear” or awe refers to reverential respect appropriate towards the Creator of all life.

In just two and a half verses the psalmist established the Lord reigns, He is enthroned above the cherubim, He is great in Zion, He is exalted above all peoples, and His name is great and awe-inspiring. Attendant to God’s qualities, all peoples of earth are to tremble, quake, and praise. These words are the vocabulary of worship. Precisely because the Lord reigns, people should revere and praise Him.

Yet, the psalmist had not fully made his most important point. In a terse three words, He is holy (two words in Hebrew), he proclaimed the heart of his message. This Lord who reigns and who has the awe-inspiring name is holy. The Hebrew term means to be set apart or to be sanctified.
Psalm 99:4-5

4 The mighty King loves justice. You have established fairness; You have administered justice and righteousness in Jacob. 5 Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at His footstool. He is holy.

READ: Psalm 99:4-5 on page 11 of the PSG.

SUMMARIZE: Direct group members to page 14 of the PSG and highlight the three important concepts that contribute to God’s holiness:

1. Fairness. Though life isn’t always fair, God is. He is the source of fairness, for He established it.

2. Justice. Justice occurs when God brings His divine order to life. God’s justice deals out blessings and punishment.

3. Righteousness. God always does what is best and what is right. Righteousness has to do with God’s moral purity.

GUIDE: Consider using the first four paragraphs of the commentary on page 17 of this Leader Guide to further supplement your explanation of God’s fairness, justice, and righteousness.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 14 of the PSG: “How does God’s justice, fairness, or righteousness impact your daily routine?”

Note: Encourage group members to be specific regarding the different ways God’s holiness makes an impact on their lives.

TRANSITION: As we move on to Psalm 99:6-9, we’ll see that God’s holiness has always demanded a response.
Psalm 99:4-5 Commentary

The psalmist held a high view of God as the eternal Ruler of the universe. As such, he addressed Him as the mighty King. One key attribute of this mighty King is that He loves justice. The term justice basically refers to the equitable treatment of all people. The idea of God being a mighty King who loves justice portrays His concern for how people treat one another on a daily basis, even in their pursuit of the mundane things of life. God is holy, but He is also involved in our everyday affairs.

Along with the view of God as the mighty King who loves justice is the belief that He Himself established fairness. You have established fairness is emphatic in Hebrew. The term fairness renders a Hebrew word meaning uprightness or straightness. The psalmist was acknowledging and praising God for establishing fairness in human society. God expects people to treat one another in an equitable manner, just as they would have others treat them.

The psalmist continued his praise of Yahweh: You have administered justice and righteousness. Once again the word order in Hebrew is emphatic, emphasizing both justice and righteousness as the results of divine activity and emphasizing His action of administering these in human society.

Righteousness is an important term. The Hebrew refers to conformity to God’s standards or norms. The mighty King who loves justice set down covenant stipulations, known as the Ten Commandments, for right living. Any person who deliberately adapted his or her life to those stipulations was considered righteous. Conformity to God’s covenant stipulations would result in the establishment of justice.

The psalmist redirected his attention from God to the members of the covenant community, commanding them to exalt the Lord our God. The verb exalt means to raise up or to extol someone as being superior to oneself. Exalting God involved praising, worshiping, adoring, and appreciating Him.

The psalmist instructed the covenant community to bow in worship at His footstool. The Hebrew verb literally means to bow oneself down to the ground. To get on one’s knees and to put one’s face to the ground was considered the posture of greatest humility. Such a humble posture was appropriate in the presence of the mighty King.

Just as he had done earlier when speaking of the Lord’s awe-inspiring name (99:3), so once again the psalmist reminded worshipers that He is holy. That Yahweh is holy is the psalmist’s most important point, forming the very heart of his message. Only because Yahweh is holy does He choose to reign and to establish justice and righteousness.

God’s holiness calls me to be holy.
Psalm 99:6-9

Psalm 99:6-9

Moses and Aaron were among His priests; Samuel also was among those calling on His name. They called to Yahweh and He answered them. He spoke to them in a pillar of cloud; they kept His decrees and the statutes He gave them. LORD our God, You answered them. You were a forgiving God to them, an avenger of their sinful actions. Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at His holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.

READ: Psalm 99:6-9 on page 11 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 15 of the PSG: “What do these verses teach us about a lifestyle of worship?”

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the key themes from page 15 of the PSG:

1. God desires to speak into our lives. And when God speaks, He wants us to listen and respond.

2. Because God is fair, just, and righteous, He can be totally trusted.

3. When we call on God’s Name, He will meet us where we are, forgive us, and put us in a right relationship with Him.

4. When we see God for who He is, we should respond by exalting Him and lowering ourselves.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 15 of the PSG: “How can we tremble at God’s holiness yet still have an intimate relationship with Him?”

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” of this session: “God’s holiness calls me to be holy.” If time permits, encourage group members to share any final thoughts or questions.
History provided an excellent source for the psalmist to illustrate Yahweh’s greatness and how His holiness formed the foundation of the covenant community. He identified Moses and Aaron as being among God’s priests. The psalmist then noted Samuel also was among those calling on His name. Calling on God’s name refers specifically to worship or to prayer, and generally to awareness of God’s leadership in one’s life. The psalmist intended to show the vertical relationship involved in the lives of Israel’s leadership that had resulted in the life and health of the covenant community. The reminder that He answered them served to encourage all covenant community members to call on His name expecting an answer.

God answered His people’s prayers in a variety of ways. As God’s people journeyed from Egypt toward the promised land, God made His presence known to them with a pillar of cloud. He also gave them a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:22). At any moment along the way, they could be assured of His presence simply by looking at the pillar hovering near them.

The psalmist shifted focus from the people back to God, addressing Him as Lord our God. He then listed three aspects of God’s interactions with His people. First, He answered them, a restatement of 99:6. God took the initiative to reveal Himself to His people. However, He also made Himself available to them whenever they called on His name. Second, the psalmist acknowledged, You were a forgiving God to them. Forgiving renders a Hebrew verb meaning to lift up. When God forgives us, He lifts up the burden of sin off our conscience allowing us once again to breathe spiritually. The psalmist thirdly noted God was an avenger of their sinful actions. This statement served to dissuade people from thinking God automatically forgave sins. Rather, sin has to be confessed. The sinner is to acknowledge his or her wrongdoing and repent from that course of thought or action.

The psalmist concluded by instructing the people once again to exalt the Lord our God. As he had done before (99:5), he called on them to bow in worship. The calls to bow in worship at His footstool (Ps. 99:5) and to bow in worship at His holy mountain (99:9) are two ways of saying the same thing. The mountain is made holy through its association with the holy God.

The final words from the psalmist’s pen were the Lord our God is holy. He expanded his earlier expression He is holy (99:3,5) to include the personal covenant name Yahweh or the Lord and the title our God, two ways of stressing the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people, while at the same time emphasizing His holiness.
GUIDE: Direct group members to page 16 of the PSG in order to consider the following responses to God’s holiness:

- **Surrender.** Submit to God’s holiness by placing your faith in Christ for salvation.

- **Bow in worship.** Be intentional about praising God this week. Set aside a specific period of time and worship Him in response to His holiness.

- **Unplug and listen.** Choose to abstain from one form of technology this week—social media, texts, TV, and so on. Use that time each day as an opportunity to listen for God’s voice.

Wrap it Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the conclusion from page 16 of the PSG: “As we live for the Lord, we become holy like Him. Then, like a precious work of art, we grow into a beautiful masterpiece made by God.”

PRAY: Conclude with a time of prayer. Ask God to convict the hearts of everyone present regarding the importance of His holiness and its implications for your lives.
My group’s prayer requests

Additional suggestions for specific groups (women, men, parents, boomers, and singles) are available at BibleStudiesforLife.com/blog.

Waiting Room

I sit in the waiting room. The receptionist took my name, recorded my insurance data, and gestured to a chair. “Please have a seat. We will call you when the doctor is ready.” I look around. A mother holds a sleeping baby. A woman with a newspaper looks at her watch, sighs, and continues the task of the hour: waiting. The waiting room. Not the examination room. That’s down the hall. Not the consultation room. That’s on the other side of the wall. Not the treatment room. Exams, consultations, and treatments all come later. The task at hand is the name of the room: the waiting room.

To continue reading “Waiting Room” from HomeLife magazine, visit BibleStudiesforLife.com/articles.