

“Nuclear Holiness”

Introduction: In C.S. Lewis’ celebrated children’s book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he tells of the adventures of four children in a magical kingdom called Narnia. The story is fun, but it’s also an allegory of Christ and salvation, with Christ represented by a lion named Aslan. When they arrive in Narnia, the children meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, and they fall into a conversation about the lion.

“Is he a man?” asked Lucy. “Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you he is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don’t you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion - *the* Lion, the great lion.” “Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “That you will, dearie, and no mistake” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” “Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy. “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

We spend a lot of time thinking about and proclaiming the goodness of God, and rightly so. But from time to time, we need to experience our knees knocking as we ponder the holiness of this God. Yes, he is the rock on which we are to build and rest the foundation of our life. In that sense, he’s the best and the safest thing there is. But he’s not safe if we treat him lightly, if we refuse to take his holiness, and his call that we be a holy people, seriously. The ark narrative in chapters 4-7 of 1 Samuel help us to see that God’s holiness is nuclear; it is both glorious and dangerous, depending on how we respond to it. Because many of you were away last week, let me quickly catch you up on the comings and goings of the ark of the LORD before we consider the holiness of God that the ark symbolizes and calls us to.

I. The LORD cannot be manipulated or controlled to suit our purposes.

A. The Philistines were a people who lived along the southwestern coastal plain of Canaan, the Promised Land. For nearly two centuries, they and the Israelites fought over borders and control of the region. 1 Samuel 4 outlines a battle with the Philistines that the Israelites lost. They determined it was because the ark had not been present with them so a few soldiers ran back to a place called Shiloh and fetched the ark from the tabernacle, which had come to rest there. The ark was a four-foot-long wooden box, decorated with gold that housed the law Moses had received from God and brought down from Mt. Sinai. It’s lid was also considered to be the throne of God and so the ark represented the very presence of God. The Israelites reasoned that if the presence of God was with them, they would win. They were wrong. They lost even worse than before. They learned that the power of God cannot be manipulated.

B. To top it off, the Philistines captured the ark. They proceeded to display it, as a kind of trophy, in the temple of their god, whose name was Dagon. They placed it next to Dagon’s statue to celebrate what they believed was Dagon’s victory over the god of the ark. But over the course of the next few months, they learned otherwise. Initially, they found Dagon toppled over before the ark, minus his head and his hands, signs of Dagon’s power. Then, they found the hand of the LORD heavy upon them, bringing plagues upon the citizens of their major cities. So, their leaders made plans to send the ark back, with a gift offering of five golden tumors and five golden rats, replicas of what had been destroying their country. It was a kind of “we give up you win” statement. They learned that all other power is powerless in the face of the God of the ark. The God of the ark cannot be manipulated or controlled.

## II. The LORD cannot be taken lightly.

A. As the storyline continues, the ark is on its way back to the people of Israel. The residents of a town near Jerusalem called Beth Shemesh see it coming. They rejoice, and everyone lives happily ever after, right? Sadly, no! It turns out there were still more lessons to be learned. They still needed to learn that they must live in relationship with the LORD on his terms. They could not take him lightly. Things started out well. The people of Beth Shemesh chopped up the cart on which the ark had returned, made a fire and offered a sacrifice of the cows. The ark and the gifts the Philistines had sent were placed high upon a rock for all to see. But in the midst of all the activity, seventy people decided that they would take the opportunity to sneak a look into the ark. It wasn't every day that the ark was out in the public eye. Usually it was hidden behind a curtain at the very center of the tabernacle, and only the priests had a chance to draw close. How cool would it be to see the actual tablets of stone that Moses had brought down from Mt. Sinai?! So, seventy of them snuck a peek into the ark . . . and God struck them all dead!!

B. Truthfully, it is a shocking turn of events. It takes us by surprise, to say the least. What's this all about? It's about the holiness of God. "Holy" means to be set apart. God's holiness, therefore, is his moral perfection, his character that is absolutely separate from evil and sin. The ark symbolized this holiness. It contained the tablets of God's law, the written expression of his moral character. The ark itself was placed in the very inner room of the tabernacle, behind a veil, in what was called the Most Holy Place. Numerous regulations surrounded the ark, including how it was to be touched and by whom. When moved, it was to be carried by long poles placed through rings attached to each side of the ark. All of this was to teach the Israelites not to take God lightly. It was to emphasize and to remind them of God's holy character. When his holiness was taken lightly, they learned that God was not safe.

## III. The LORD calls his people to be different, to make a difference.

A. But this was not because God was mean, or so that God could have a little fun zapping his people every now and then! It was, and still is, because God calls his people to be holy, to be set apart, to be distinctive from the world, not so that we can keep our distance from the world, but so that we can minister effectively, and missionally, and make a difference to it. God calls us to be different in order to make a difference. This call begins in the book of Exodus when God informs his people that he has rescued them from slavery in Egypt, not to enjoy the comfort of a Red Sea resort but to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). In Leviticus, a book devoted to directing the Israelites to holy worship and holy living, God repeats this call: "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:45).

B. Lest we think this was just an OT thing and not applicable to us, Peter picks up on both of these passages and applies them to those who are now God's people since the arrival of Jesus - the church (1 Peter 1:14-16, NLT):

Obey God because you are his children. Don't slip back into your old ways of doing evil; you didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God—who chose you to be his children—is holy. For he himself has said, *Be holy because I am holy.*

And then Peter lays out the missional reason for our holy behavior (1 Peter 2:9-12, NLT):

own of For you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, his very possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Here, Peter is also picking up on the teaching of Jesus in which Jesus calls his followers to be salt and light so that those who see us may be led to God and give glory to him: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Ma. 5:16).

C. So here's the thing about God's holiness and his call for his people to be holy. We are to be different from those that surround us so that we can reveal the goodness of God to them. If we don't embrace a countercultural identity, an identity grounded in the holiness of God, we will not and cannot be a light to the world. To put it another way, if we don't take God seriously—his call to reveal his holy character through the holy lives that we seek to live—the world won't take us seriously. If we take God lightly, the world will just take us lightly.

Illustration: How damaging our actions can be toward the witness we are called to make came home last month (9/17) in an article that appeared in the Washington Post: "Evangelical college football players face arrest over hazing incident." It described a horrible incident perpetrated by five players at Wheaton College (IL). Apparently, these players tackled and duct taped a freshman in his dorm, threw him in a vehicle, played Middle Eastern music, and uttered anti-Muslim slurs as they drove this student away. The student incurred injuries that required several surgeries. Twice in the article mention was made to the statement of faith Wheaton students sign, "espousing evangelical beliefs and standards," Now, on the one hand, this certainly, and unfairly, paints the entire college with a broad brush. But that's just the point. Our actions get linked by the world to the faith we profess. If they are not seen to be different from that world, why should anyone bother?

With that in mind, listen to author Brett McCracken, who observes this about God's holiness and subsequent call to us, in his recent book, *Uncomfortable* (pp. 60-63):

God's holiness is no joke. . . There is a discomfort in being different, but it is for a missional purpose. It is for the sake of the world. . . The more Christians look, talk, act, and believe like the culture around us, the less interested others will be in what we have to offer. Why would anyone go to church and bother with Christianity if it is only a replica of the sorts of things they can find at the mall, movie theater, community center, or nightclub? It is the different-ness of the gospel, not its hipness, that changes lives and transforms the world.

As historians of the early church point out, the earliest Christians attracted others to the faith by living starkly different lives from those around them, lives of sacrifice and service, lives of grace, lives of virtue, lives that embraced a moral character that revealed a moral, holy God.

The LORD, as the ark narratives reveal, takes his, and our, holiness seriously. Thus, it's not a bad thing for our knees to knock every now and then if it helps us take him and his call on us more seriously. He is the King, he is good, and he desires his kingdom and his goodness to be revealed in and through our lives. Let us not take him lightly; rather, let us take time to be holy (#402).