

[What Does Holiness Mean? Bible Definition and References \(biblestudytools.com\)](http://biblestudytools.com)

### [Easton's Bible Dictionary - Holiness](#)

**Holiness**, in the highest sense belongs to God ( [Isaiah 6:3](#) ; [Revelation 15:4](#) ), and to Christians as consecrated to God's service, and in so far as they are conformed in all things to the will of God ( [Romans 6:19](#) [Romans 6:22](#) ; [Ephesians 1:4](#) ; [Titus 1:8](#) ; [1 Peter 1:15](#) ). Personal holiness is a work of gradual development. It is carried on under many hindrances, hence the frequent admonitions to watchfulness, prayer, and perseverance ( [1 Corinthians 1:30](#) ; [2 co 7:1](#) ; [Ephesians 4:23](#) [Ephesians 4:24](#) ).

#### I. In the Old Testament Meaning of the Term.

There has been much discussion as to the original meaning of the Semitic root Q-D-SH, by which the notion of holiness is expressed in the Old Testament. Some would connect it with an Assyrian word denoting purity, clearness; most modern scholars incline to the view that the primary idea is that of cutting off or separation. Etymology gives no sure verdict on the point, but the idea of separation lends itself best to the various senses in which the word "holiness" is employed. In primitive Semitic usage "holiness" seems to have expressed nothing more than that ceremonial separation of an object from common use which the modern study of savage religions has rendered familiar under the name of taboo (W.R. Smith, Religion of the Semites, Lect iv). But within the Biblical sphere, with which alone we are immediately concerned, holiness attaches itself first of all, not to visible objects, but to the invisible Yahweh, and to places, seasons, things and human beings only in so far as they are associated with Him. And while the idea of ceremonial holiness runs through the Old Testament, the ethical significance which Christianity attributes to the term is never wholly absent, and gradually rises in the course of the revelation into more emphatic prominence.

#### 1. The Holiness of God:

As applied to God the notion of holiness is used in the Old Testament in two distinct senses:

##### (1) Absoluteness and Majesty

First in the more general sense of separation from all that is human and earthly. It thus denotes the absoluteness, majesty, and awfulness of the Creator in His distinction from the creature. In this use of the word, "holiness" is little more than an equivalent general term for "Godhead," and the adjective "holy" is almost synonymous with "Divine" (compare [Daniel 4:8,9,18](#); [5:11](#)). Yahweh's "holy arm" ([Isaiah 52:10](#); [Psalms 98:1](#)) is His Divine arm, and His "holy name" ([Leviticus 20:3](#), etc.) is His Divine name. When Hannah sings "There is none holy as Yahweh" ([1 Samuel 2:2](#)), the rest of the verse suggests that she is referring, not to His ethical holiness, but simply to His supreme Divinity.

##### (2) Ethical Holiness

But, in the next place, holiness of character in the distinct ethical sense is ascribed to God. The injunction, "Be ye holy; for I am holy" ([Leviticus 11:44](#); [19:2](#)), plainly implies an ethical conception. Men cannot resemble God in His incommunicable attributes. They can reflect His likeness only along the lines of those moral qualities of righteousness and love in which true holiness consists. In the Psalmists and Prophets the Divine holiness becomes, above all, an ethical reality convicting men of sin ([Isaiah 6:3,1](#)) and demanding of those who would stand in His presence clean hands and a pure heart ([Psalms 24:3](#)).

## 2. Holiness of Place, Time and Object:

From the holiness of God is derived that ceremonial holiness of things which is characteristic of the Old Testament religion. Whatever is connected with the worship of the holy Yahweh is itself holy. Nothing is holy in itself, but anything becomes holy by its consecration to Him. A place where He manifests His presence is holy ground ([Exodus 3:5](#)). The tabernacle or temple in which His glory is revealed is a holy building ([Exodus 28:29](#); [2 Chronicles 35:5](#)); and all its sacrifices ([Exodus 29:33](#)), ceremonial materials ([30:25](#); [Numbers 5:17](#)) and utensils ([1 Kings 8:4](#)) are also holy. The Sabbath is holy because it is the Sabbath of the Lord ([Exodus 20:8-11](#)). "Holiness, in short, expresses a relation, which consists negatively in separation from common use, and positively in dedication to the service of Yahweh" (Skinner in HDB, II, 395).

## 3. Holiness of Men:

The holiness of men is of two kinds:

### (1) Ceremonial

A ceremonial holiness, corresponding to that of impersonal objects and depending upon their relation to the outward service of Yahweh. Priests and Levites are holy because they have been "hallowed" or "sanctified" by acts of consecration ([Exodus 29:1](#); [Leviticus 8:12,30](#)). The Nazirite is holy because he has separated himself unto the Lord ([Numbers 6:5](#)). Above all, Israel, notwithstanding all its sins and shortcomings, is holy, as a nation separated from other nations for Divine purposes and uses ([Exodus 19:6](#), etc.; compare [Leviticus 20:24](#)).

### (2) Ethical and Spiritual

But out of this merely ceremonial holiness there emerges a higher holiness that is spiritual and ethical. For unlike other creatures man was made in the image of God and capable of reflecting the Divine likeness. And as God reveals Himself as ethically holy, He calls man to a holiness resembling His own ([Leviticus 19:2](#)). In the so-called "Law of Holiness" ([Leviticus 17:1-26:46](#)), God's demand for moral holiness is made clear; and yet the moral contents of the Law are still intermingled with ceremonial elements ([Leviticus 17:10](#); [19:19](#); [21:1](#)). In psalm and prophecy, however, a purely ethical conception comes into view--the conception of a human holiness which rests upon righteousness and truth ([Psalms 15:1](#)) and the possession of a contrite and humble spirit ([Isaiah 57:15](#)). This corresponds to the knowledge of a God who, being Himself ethically holy, esteems justice, mercy and lowly piety more highly than sacrifice ([Hosea 6:6](#); [Micah 6:6-8](#)).

## II. In the New Testament:

### The Christian Conception.

The idea of holiness is expressed here chiefly by the word *hagios* and its derivatives, which correspond very closely to the words of the Q-D-SH group in Hebrew, and are employed to render them in the Septuagint. The distinctive feature of the New Testament idea of holiness is that the external aspect of it has almost entirely disappeared, and the ethical meaning has become supreme. The ceremonial idea still exists in contemporary Judaism, and is typically represented by the Pharisees ([Mark 7:1-13](#); [Luke 18:11](#)). But Jesus proclaimed a new view of religion and morality according to which men are cleansed or defiled, not by anything outward, but by the thoughts of their hearts ([Matthew 15:17-20](#)), and God is to

be worshipped neither in Samaria nor Jerusalem, but wherever men seek Him in spirit and in truth ([John 4:21-24](#)).

#### 1. Applied to God:

In the New Testament the term "holy" is seldom applied to God, and except in quotations from the Old Testament ([Luke 1:49](#); [1 Peter 1:15](#)), only in the Johannine writings ([John 17:11](#); [Revelation 4:8](#); [6:10](#)). But it is constantly used of the Spirit of God ([Matthew 1:18](#); [Acts 1:2](#); [Romans 5:5](#), etc.), who now, in contrast with Old Testament usage, becomes specifically the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost.

#### 2. Applied to Christ:

In several passages the term is applied to Christ ([Mark 1:24](#); [Acts 3:14](#); [4:30](#), etc.), as being the very type of ethical perfection (compare [Hebrews 7:26](#)).

#### 3. Applied to Things:

In keeping with the fact that things are holy in a derivative sense through their relationship to God, the word is used of Jerusalem ([Matthew 4:5](#)), the Old Testament covenant ([Luke 1:72](#)), the Scriptures ([Romans 1:2](#)), the Law ([Romans 7:12](#)), the Mount of Transfiguration ([2 Peter 1:18](#)), etc.

#### 4. Applied to Christians:

But it is especially in its application to Christians that the idea of holiness meets us in the New Testament in a sense that is characteristic and distinctive. Christ's people are regularly called "saints" or holy persons, and holiness in the high ethical and spiritual meaning of the word is used to denote the appropriate quality of their life and conduct.

##### (1) As Separate from the World

No doubt, as applied to believers, "saints" conveys in the first place the notion of a separation from the world and a consecration to God. Just as Israel under the old covenant was a chosen race, so the Christian church in succeeding to Israel's privileges becomes a holy nation ([1 Peter 2:9](#)), and the Christian individual, as one of the elect people, becomes a holy man or woman ([Colossians 3:12](#)). In Paul's usage all baptized persons are "saints," however far they may still be from the saintly character (compare [1 Corinthians 1:2,14](#) with 5:1).

##### (2) As Bound to the Pursuit of an Ethical Ideal

But though the use of the name does not imply high ethical character as a realized fact, it always assumes it as an ideal and an obligation. It is taken for granted that the Holy Spirit has taken up His abode in the heart of every regenerate person, and that a work of positive sanctification is going on there. The New Testament leaves no room for the thought of a holiness divorced from those moral qualities which the holy God demands of those whom He has called to be His people.

See SANCTIFICATION.

LITERATURE.

Robertson Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, Lects. iii, iv; A. B. Davidson, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 145; Schultz, *Theology of the Old Testament*, II, 167; Orr, *Sin as a Problem of Today*, chapter iii; Sanday-Headlam, *Romans*, 12; articles "Holiness" in HDB and "Heiligkeit Gottes im AT" in RE.

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### [Lesson 3: God's Holiness | Bible.org](#)

"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing." ([Habakkuk 1:13a](#) NIV)

1. When I say the word "holiness," what comes to your mind?

Holiness is the state or quality of being holy. "Holy" is used more than any other word in the Bible to describe God so it must be very important. The word "holy" by itself means, "to set apart." That means one thing is totally separated from something else. So, holiness means "to be set apart." God is also set apart from something. In the Bible, God is called "the Holy One of Israel" and "the Holy God." So, He is totally set apart, but from what?

The Bible teaches that our God is set apart from these:

- *Set apart from any other name.* God's name is holy. His name is set apart from any other name in the entire universe. That includes the names of other gods that people want to worship instead of the one true God.
- *Set apart from His creation.* God is not like anything or anyone He has created. That includes angels and people. God is set apart from His creation.
- *Set apart from anything that is sinful or evil.* In fact, this is what is stressed the most about God in the Bible. He is the most "holy," and no one is as "holy" as He is. He is perfect.

"The word holy calls attention to all that God is. It reminds us that His love is holy love, His justice is holy justice, His mercy is holy mercy, His knowledge is holy knowledge, His spirit is holy spirit." (R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, p. 57)

2. Read [Habakkuk 1:13](#). Habakkuk lived at the time of the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem (~600 BC). How does Habakkuk describe God at the beginning of the verse?

In God's holiness, He cannot even look on evil or wrongdoing. It is a unique part of His character—who He is. God's holiness sets him apart from anything that is sinful or evil.

3. If God is perfectly good all the time, what are some things that God cannot do?

4. Read [James 1:13](#). What is something else that God will not do?

5. It is very comforting to know that our God can be trusted to be good all the time. Can human beings be perfectly good all the time?

6. Evil and wrongdoing that people do are called "sin" in the Bible. Give some examples of human sins.

When God created Adam and Eve, God designed people to have a relationship with Him. Because Adam and Eve disobeyed Him, sin entered the world. You can read about this in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve became separated from the perfect fellowship they had with God. And, all people born after them were born sinners. What a bummer!

But, if human beings are sinful, this creates a problem because God is set apart from sin. That's His holiness. He hates sin and must judge it. The Bible tells us that our sins separate us from Him. God doesn't want us to be separated from Him forever. So He made a way to bring us back to Him. But, this meant getting rid of our sin.

God had a marvelous plan. His own Son would come to earth to be born as a baby, grow up to live as a human just like us, and die for our sins so we could be forgiven of them. That's the wonder of Christmas. At Christmas, we celebrate God's absolutely marvelous plan. When we trust in Jesus, He will remove our sin from us so we are no longer separated from Him. Amazing gift!

7. Read [Isaiah 1:18](#). What is God's promise to us?

During your school days, did you have a teacher who marked wrong answers with red ink? Red usually says, "That's wrong. That's not acceptable." When God says our sins are bright red, He is saying the wrong things we do are not acceptable to a holy God.

8. What do you think the phrase "white as snow" means?

Freshly fallen snow looks so pristine, doesn't it? Pure and clean. The phrase "white like wool" refers to freshly prepared sheep's wool that is perfectly clean and hasn't been dyed with any colors yet. It's also pure and clean. That's what God does to our sin the moment we trust in Jesus so we can get close to Him as our Father God.

And, here is the absolutely even-more-wonderful part: as we live each day as believers in Jesus, God continues to cleanse our sin from us so we can be close to Him.

We can enjoy our relationship with a holy God who loves us dearly, the kind of relationship that He created us to enjoy.

9. Read [2 Corinthians 5:21](#). What does God do to our sin? What do we get from Christ?

When God looks at us, He doesn't see sin in our lives. Jesus takes away our sin. We are no longer separated from our holy God. He sees Jesus' righteousness instead. Our sins are washed white as snow. This is called, "The Great Exchange." Jesus takes our sin; we receive His righteousness. We can only marvel at God's goodness to us in this gift.

10. Read [1 Peter 1:14-16](#). What does God desire for us?

Holiness means "to be set apart." God desires that we would choose to live set apart from anything that is sinful or evil. Then, we would reflect His character in our own lives.

11. Read [1 Corinthians 10:13](#). What does God promise to us when we are tempted?

12. What confidence does knowing this give you?

Temptation to do wrong is part of life here on earth. Those temptations are not coming from God. Instead, He provides a way of escape for every temptation. That's His promise.

**God's holiness means He is set apart from anything that is sinful or evil.** God cleanses us from sin when we trust in Jesus so that we are no longer separated from Him.

Through His Spirit inside us He also helps us live as holy people, set apart from sin in our own lives.

### **Trusting Your Father God**

#### **1) Bible verse to learn:**

"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing." ([Habakkuk 1:13a](#) NIV)