

Holiness P1

What's the Christian Ideal? - Redefining Holiness

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What's the Christian Ideal? - Redefining Holiness

Jon: Hi, this is Jon at The Bible Project. We've been working on a lot of things here at The Bible Project, and one of those things that you might be familiar with is a series of videos on YouTube called Theme Videos. Theme Videos are biblical motifs, biblical ideas that you could take and trace from the beginning of Scripture all the way to the end. It's a theme that develops, that has its own story arc, and always culminates in Jesus and finds its climax in him.

We have about a dozen theme videos on our YouTube channel now, and we have plans for another dozen to complete that series. These themes are so deep and rich that we can't cover all of it in a five-minute animated video. These podcasts conversations help fill those out.

But another project we want to do is to make workbooks that accompany every single theme video. We've been working on this project. We made a beta workbook on the theme of Heaven and Earth. We printed about 5,000 of those and we sent them out to some of our supporters to test them out with groups. We're getting feedback on those right now. So thank you for doing that.

We're also starting to lay the groundwork for another workbook on the theme of Holiness. And that's what this podcast is going to be about. As we thought about this workbook on holiness and what the big takeaways were, we decided we needed to have a conversation to flesh it all out. So we turned on the mics and recorded that conversation.

You're going to hear a new voice on this podcast. His name is Paul Pastor. He's a colleague of ours, and he's an author, and he's helping us write this workbook on holiness.

So why holiness? Holiness is a confusing and loaded word. It's a word we don't use in common English, at least I don't, but it's a word we constantly use in religious settings. "God is holy." "I want to be holy." "Holy, holy, holy."

What do we actually mean when we're saying, "holy?" Does a negative connotation to holiness, where someone's holier than thou detached, stuffy, and stuck up? Is that what we mean or is it something else entirely?

Tim: Most humans have an intuitive sense that there is something transcendent or beautiful that we sometimes attain to. What we want to focus on is not just

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morality, and not just being set apart, but all those things are really ways the Bible is saying we can participate in something transcendent and beautiful. Like that thing that it's only God, but it is something that God wants to invite people into.

Jon: Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

If I remember correctly, the reason why we're having this conversation is we're writing a workbook. Actually, first, I should introduce up a new person in the conversation, Paul Pastor.

Paul: Hi, everybody. I'm not a pastor. This is just my name. So I guess I am a Pastor.

Jon: He is a Pastor.

Tim: You're a Pastor. You're Paul Pastor.

Paul: I'm Paul Pastor.

Jon: Paul Pastor is an author, and he's helping us write a workbook. We're going to try to write workbooks. This is the idea.

Tim: For all the theme videos.

Jon: For all the theme videos. We'll hopefully one day have an accompanying workbook.

Tim: We try to hand at one already, had a good learning experience, and decided we wanted the help of somebody who could write better than we can.

Jon: Who actually does that right. And that's Paul. Paul has been talking with us about the next workbook, which is going to be on the theme of holiness. As we were getting ready, we wanted to have a discussion about one aspect that we think will kind of ground the conference, which is...Well, we were calling it the ideal.

This idea of God's holiness...I mean, let's back up. Holiness is a really abstract term, and for our purposes, the shorthand is we're talking about it as God's otherness is uniqueness. I don't know. Tim, why don't you actually give the summary?

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Tim: Yeah, sure. Holiness in the Bible it's a foreign concept to modern western people's view. It doesn't matter vocabulary. Many concepts we already have in our head.

In the Bible, most religious people, if they know the word, they connect holiness with "moral behavior." Or if they've made it through Leviticus and internalized it, some they'll connect holiness with something about "being set apart" or "people being set apart from common use."

So "holiness," essentially, I think, in most people's understanding is about being a "good person" and being "set apart" from bad things. Which is one of those things where, yeah, okay, that's part of it, but that's just one part. That's that one part actually doesn't really even make very much sense without a much bigger picture and within the larger story. That's what we did in the holiness video.

Then we wanted to unpack what it means for God to be holy, and then what it means for people to participate in God's holiness, and how Jesus fits in to that. There you go. It has something to do with being set apart.

Paul: Actually, just before this conversation, Tim and I were perusing some things he saw in a Bible dictionary. We noted that a lot of people quickly define holiness as the absence of something, like the absence of sin or the absence of impurity. And that's certainly included in the biblical narrative.

But there's something more there. There's the presence of something. And that's what we're working to stretch towards here. What is that present thing and how do we best name it? And what does that tell us about God and ourselves?

Tim: I've got open in front of me The Dictionary of the Old Testament University Press. They're big, fat dictionary just on the Pentateuch.

Paul: God bless them.

Tim: God bless them. They have a great entry on holiness. Who wrote this article? J.E Hartley.

Jon: I don't know him.

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Tim: I don't know who that is. He goes on to say, "Holiness is often defined as either one separation objects consecrated for use in the temple or tabernacle are removed or set apart." Then he says, "However, separation doesn't get us to the end of the meaning of holiness because it fails to provide any content to what it means for something to be holy or set apart in the first place"

Then he says, "Second, holiness and morality or ethics are often so equated that people use the terms synonymously." And this is where we get the phrase "holier than thou" in English, where "holier than thou" usually refers to a religious person who thinks that they live more morally than other people. He says, "God is described as holy in terms of his moral character, but God's moral character isn't just his holiness. It's his righteousness, his goodness, his generosity, and so on."

Then he says this. "In Israel's Canaanite neighbors, they wrote lots of literature, and their gods are often called holy." Then he notes this. This is fascinating. He says, "In Canaanite literature, things that are not divine but connected with the divine or the spirit realm are often called holy, like trees, or streams, or burial grounds, sacred objects that are closely related to the gods and the spirit world."

Then he talks about how, in many of the Psalms in the Old Testament, God's holiness is used and described along with adjectives like majestic, glorious, awesome, inspiring and beautiful. And he says that's where we should start is this idea of beauty and power and goodness as the core meaning of holiness.

Jon: That brings us back to I think what we wanted to focus on for this conversation, is to say, "What is that? What is like this ultimate good? What is an ideal kind of state of perfection - is a word we will probably start throwing around in a way?"

But if God is holy because he has these things: he is the manifest, awesome, goodness, and if he created creation, the universe, to be that what does that look like? What does that state? What is this ideal? What does the Bible have to say about what it means to be in a state of perfection?

Tim: One of the few times - we may focus on this in the video - the only time in the Old Testament God's called Holy, holy, holy, which is in Isaiah as vision where he's inside the temple—

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Jon: Thrice Holy.

Tim: Thrice Holy.

Paul: Isaiah chapter 6.

Tim: Isaiah chapter 6. God's holiness in the next line of what they say, is connected to his status as the creator, the whole earth is full of his glory. So it's God status as the creator of this world that itself is beautiful and amazing and awe-inspiring. It's just a manifestation of how much more amazing and awe-inspiring the beautiful mind that designed it is.

The idea is God's the ultimate of everything. What we want to focus on is not just morality, and not just being set apart. But all those things are really ways the Bible is saying we can participate in something transcendent and beautiful. Like that thing that it's only God, but it is something that God wants to invite people into. That's what we want to get at.

That's where we're going to start the workbook is to be in touch with most humans have an intuitive sense that there is something transcendent or beautiful that we sometimes attain to, or something ethical and good and noble, the right thing to do, but that I only sometimes do, or only halfway do.

I think that's where we want to start at, is to say, we actually all have a concept of holiness even if we don't use that word to describe it.

Jon: That's the when if we can do that. Maybe it's not the right move, but can we start with this general idea of we all hunger for the sense of completeness, where everything is firing on all cylinders, things are connected, things work together, things don't decay, relationships are healthy, relationships don't fall apart.

This sense of shalom, this is something that deep in our guts we desire and we long for, which is very connected to the...You brought up Tim CS Lewis. Is it?

Tim: Yeah. Many places that theme comes out. But I forget the inconsolable longing. This is a famous passage in...oh, I forget.

Paul: I don't remember either. But it strikes me how quickly this conversation gets pastoral, like immediately intersecting our life where it hurts in pain and

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pleasure. Just how quickly we see the broken aspect of that through pain or through suffering. And that feeling, this isn't how it should be.

Jon: I like starting there because this idea of holiness as it pertains to just some ethic that I'm supposed to have, it sounds challenging. It sounds isolating in the sense that the holier than thou like, I got to be the holy person and so it's going to make put me on some different level that I'm going to look down at people. That's interesting.

Tim: That's like the ethical side. The other one is like, "Oh, God set apart." It says he set-apartness and he's the holy one. It's interesting. It's very interesting.

Jon: It's like a thought experiment.

Tim: But is that where we want to start to help us really grasp this idea?

Jon: But what Paul just was talking about is this thing that we all wrestle with, which is, why aren't things a little myriad right now?

Paul: Or if this is how they were supposed to be, why am I feeling so messed up about it too? Why would I have this emotion if it didn't point me to something greater than what we're experiencing?

Jon: So what we're longing for there, can we say that what we're longing for there is holiness?

Paul: That's a really good question. Or is holiness the byproduct of some third thing?

Tim: We should find an analogy to sort out our vocabulary, probably. Holiness is an adjective that describes the status of God who is set apart because he is the ultimate embodiment and definition of beauty, goodness, awesomeness.

Jon: So "holiness" is an adjective?

Tim: Holiness is the way we talk about the gap between me and the ideal. If God is that ultimate everything, then there's the gap that make "what do I call that distinction because I'm not all those things?" The category of something that is more ideal than I am right now, that is holy.

Jon: Got it. Something connected to the ideal is holy.

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Tim: Correct. But the word doesn't describe what the ideal is. The word is just describing the status God has as the embodiment of the ideal.

Jon: I think that's where I wanted to start the workbook with this idea of what this thing is. We need an analogy, but also we need a vocabulary for what that thing is. We're calling it the ideal. Is there a better word?

Tim: Well, in Isaiah 6:3, it's called "Glory."

Paul: Kavod in Hebrew.

Tim: Yeah, kavod, which is just God's significance as the beautiful mind that generated the universe.

Paul: Brown-Driver-Briggs, kind of the key Hebrew dictionary also includes "abundance" as one of the possible translations of kavod.

Tim: Yes, that's right. Fullness.

Paul: This understanding of complete fullness.

Jon: I like that. Fullness, abundance, completeness, those are interesting words.

Paul: Because there's a sense of limitlessness to that. It's really intriguing when you think about the character of God as somebody who's always giving, always creating. And that's part of where his glory and his uniqueness comes from is in the fact that he's limitlessly abundant.

[00:16:21]

Jon: We have a state which is "abundance."

Tim: Yeah, fullness.

Jon: Fullness. We have a state to describe the discrepancy between something that's more connected to fullness and abundance than everyday life, which we call holiness. And then we have just kind of everyday life state - which is what?

Tim: The biblical word "chol." Common. Common.

Jon: Common.

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Tim: Chol.

Jon: I thought you were just saying the word "whole."

Tim: Oh, no. Chol is the Hebrew word.

Jon: Like whole?

Tim: So there's sacred or holy, kadosh, and then there's what is not sacred. What is common, and not whole. Then that maps on to another set of vocabulary, which is "pure," the thing that is close to the holy and therefore more like the ideal.

Jon: That thing is pure.

Tim: Then the opposite of being in a state of purity, it's being impure. English translations often have unclean.

Jon: Clean and unclean.

Tim: Then how do you become unclean? We talked about this in the video. You touch something dead, you yourself have deadness on your skin, like mold, or skin disease or you're leaking reproductive fluids, male or female.

Jon: I think we are getting ahead of ourselves here.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. But I'm just saying those things will render you impure. This is interesting mapping where there's the sacred and the common and there's the pure and there's the impure.

Jon: So the sacred is the wholeness, the common is impurity and just everyday life is common.

Tim: Yeah, that's right,

Jon: And when you are living in the common and you encounter something that's connected to the sacred or full, you would describe that thing as being holy?

Tim: Yeah, you'd describe it as holy. Then if somebody asked you, "What is it that makes God the ultimate?" You would use words like Isaiah. "I saw God sitting on a throne and he was awesome, he was majestic, he was beautiful, he wasn't completely other and completely good."

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- Paul: That common rhetorical question, who is like God?
- Jon: I think there might be a military analogy in this maybe. What is it called when you're civilian or you're enlisted? I don't know what it would be.
- Tim: Yeah, sure, sure
- Jon: What is it called?
- Tim: Commoner.
- Jon: Well, the civilian is the commoner.
- Tim: Civilian is the commoner, yeah.
- Jon: Then you've got the per—
- Tim: Just like an officer or...
- Jon: Dad, what's the...? My dad sitting here? You don't know? Okay.
- Tim: That's about status.
- Jon: It's about status. And so if a civilian—
- [crosstalk 00:19:30]
- Paul: And purpose too. Status and purpose - they are set apart for something.
- Tim: Yes. Good. Keep going.
- Jon: So what then would be the word when a civilian encounter someone in the military?
- Tim: High ranking officer
- Jon: Especially, a high ranking officer? When you notice that that person is a lot more high ranking than you, what's the word you would use to describe that?
- Paul: I have a word to describe the proper way to encounter that. And that's protocol. Like if you meet a government official, you're told to go through a series of protocol, which are the manners that you use to show respect short not just for the person, but for the position of the person.

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Tim: That's right.

Paul: So perhaps there's this element of protocol that we could think about. Like if we were to meet, say, the President of United States, say the Queen of England, say any sitting dignitary, there are ways we would move and not move, ways we would approach them.

Tim: And if you were to take them out of context and ask about the purpose of those behaviors, they might seem ridiculous or even irrational.

Jon: So we're connecting that to purity laws right now? Is that what we are doing?

Tim: Correct.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: They are like analogy to purity laws or kosher food laws. That's a great. That's good analogy.

Jon: So now I just need that word that's the analog to holy.

Tim: Maybe we can just use the word "holy."

Jon: Otherness.

Tim: And then I guess that's where the analogy breaks down. Because the military, in general, isn't the embodiment of beauty, and goodness and ethical.

Jon: But if it wasn't military because I defend and fight and something like that, but it's a status because I represent complete fullness this - what was the other word we're using? - abundance, I represent those things, then the discrepancy would be just holy.

Tim: That's right. When biblical characters like Moses in the burning bush, people in the temple, Moses trying to go into the tabernacle, Isaiah in the temple, different psalms that open up describing God's holiness, all of these biblical texts describe the encounter as encountering light, like brightness, light, power, overwhelming beauty. They countered—

Paul: There's a sense of fire and danger to it.

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Tim: Also there was that double-edged, that the goodness is so good, that it can be dangerous to you. But yeah, all of it revolves around this idea, this overflowing embodiment of all that is good and beautiful and powerful located in a person, a being.

Paul: I have a question then. If that's what we were made for, why the discrepancy? Why do we need to learn how to re-approach that? I understand sin and the story of corruption, but it seems complicated.

Tim: Well, that's true. I'm just thinking through the biblical narrative. The way that Genesis 1 and 2 gets this is through the image. Humans are the image of God. Humans are like reflective mirror.

Jon: To reflect the holiness.

Tim: Yeah. We are meant to be embodiments of all that is good and awesome.

Jon: Shouldn't be a foreign thing.

Tim: Humans are made as these mirrors that are to reflect the goodness that puts God in the status of holiness. And then the story of the rebellion and all that, Genesis 3 to 11. I guess you do have to say it in narrative terms. Humans are made to be holy because we're mirrors of the Divine.

Paul: So abundance is kind of our natural habitat then?

Tim: Yeah, right. As the story goes, then we are living a sub-human existence.

Paul: That's an interesting way to think of it.

Jon: Right. To be fully human is to be connected to abundance for complete life.

Tim: Yeah, of our Creator and therefore our purpose...

Jon: And therefore to be holy?

Tim: Yes. Probably the one place where this gets—Go ahead.

Jon: What's the Hebrew word for "holy"?

Paul: Kadosh.

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Jon: Kadosh.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "Holy" is just such a loaded word for me in English. It's just so hard. Yeah. Anyways.

Tim: But again holiness describes the set-apartness of a being that is the ideal.

Jon: So we wouldn't use that word if we were connected to abundant fullness? We wouldn't say like, "Oh, that's holy," because we wouldn't need to describe the discrepancy?

Tim: Correct. It's the same kind of thing going on the last page of the Bible. The renewed creation. There's no temple because all creation is the temple. Everything's holy because it's the new creation. And God's character is described as light. That's why there's no need for the sun, or moon, all those this kind of thing.

Paul: So he's everywhere?

Tim: Yeah, it's everywhere. John in that passage is riffing off of, sheesh, Ezekiel 47, 48, Zachariah 14, all these things that talk about the new creation. There's in Zachariah 14, where he has a vision of the New Jerusalem and the new creation, and he says even the little pots in people's kitchens or the bells on horse's bridles will be holy. He tries to think of the most common unremarkable things of everyday life, and says, "Even those will be kadosh."

Paul: Like your hubcaps and tin cans.

Tim: Even your toothbrush will be holy. Something like that. That's the idea. What we want is both a word and to describe this ideal, and then to say, "Most of the human experience as most humans know it is both in awareness of things ought to be better, I ought to be better."

Jon: That there is this sense of something.

Tim: There is some ideal or something that I'm supposed to be but that I'm perpetually not. And there's something this world ought to be but that it's not. And now what is that thing that should be?

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Jon: Then coming into contact with that thing, it would appear to be holy. That thing, from this vantage point, the vantage point of the common, the ideal is other holy, unique.

Tim: Here. I'll share Personally. I just had this experience at the Oregon coast recently where I was there with my kids and we were building...Actually, we weren't even building sandcastles. We were there for like four days.

Every day we had shovels and we would try and make in the section of sand that's getting...every eighth wave comes up, so you have a couple minutes. And we would try to build the biggest heap of sand possible to withstand the wave as the tide was coming in. My kids just loved it. We did it for like two hours, just heaping piles of sand, only to watch them get crashed.

Then after, I don't know, half an hour, I started to have this transcendent moment of, this is the universe. The waves would start coming, the tide would be coming in, and I was just like, "We're just making this thing and there's nothing we can do to make this thing withstand the power and energy of the waves in the course of time."

Then there was just ocean roaring in my face as we're out there in the surf and so on in the end. Then I'm just going like, "Oh, my, we're space rock in the middle of the universe." I was having one of those moments. Then I was envisioning us here on the planet.

Jon: Building cities?

Tim: Building cities and civilizations. You know, it's one of those moments of the surf—

Jon: And then the wave of time just inevitably gets to wipe them out.

Tim: That's right. I just had such a heightened awareness of my mortality, of the shortness of my life, of my day to day activities where we're all making the sand pile bigger and bigger. But I wasn't depressed. I was just awe inspired by the power of the ocean. It's like it put me in my place. Really, I was just overwhelmed by the power of the ocean and the waves, and how it's the majority of our planet.

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Jon: It's like the ocean works on a different level than you. It's been there long before you, will be there long after you. It's got a power that's completely different. So to you, you live in a very common space and it lives in this very grand, intense abundance, full—

Tim: It's in abundance of space, of energy, of light, influence, of power, and of longevity. Like the ocean's been here long before me, it'll be...That's what I was having at that moment with the ocean. And it was overwhelming to me.

[crosstalk 00:29:13]

Jon: That feeling you had was the feeling of the oceans holiness?

Tim: Correct. That's right.

Jon: It's otherness.

Tim: I would say, other than me, it's holy. But what I'm really describing is all of these qualities that the ocean has that I do not.

Jon: Well, you're describing the feeling that you're getting the sense of the difference between you and the ocean is the sense of the holiness. But then all the qualities you could call it something else? It's grandness, its awesomeness, it's glory if you were to use those words.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: It's also interesting with this metaphor "the ocean can destroy you very quickly."

Paul: And we teach our kids about that. You don't approach it with your back. There's a protocol of approach when it comes to the ocean.

Tim: Yeah. The same afternoon, my son wanted to drag a big driftwood log out into the surf and ride the log, and I was trying to tell him, "Dude, that's such a bad idea."

Jon: Especially on the Oregon coast?

Tim: Oh, yeah, because these waves would just totally lift it up and drop it on your head kind of thing.

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[00:30:56]

Jon: Here's one thing I'm thinking about. The workbook is on holiness, but of holiness is just one term to describe this moment of realizing the otherness of something that you're in the presence of, then it's really just one approach to begin talking about a much bigger set of ideas.

I sometimes wonder, is this workbook really on holiness or is it on this bigger idea of being made for something grand, the ideal, longing for it, and experiencing it sometimes, and that experience being whole the sense of holiness and then a call to our lives to participate in it, and a sense of awe and reverence for the author of it? All of these ideas are what we're really going to be talking about, possibly. And so holiness just becomes one way to begin the conversation. Or are we strictly going to be just talking about the term, the word, the vocabulary of holiness?

Paul: Or perhaps the image of holiness, pictures of holiness. We've had conversations about this before, but the Bible at specific intervals throughout its story gives the people of God an image that they can see God's holiness.

The intent of meeting of meeting the tabernacle, the temple. Of course, that's reinterpreted later as Jesus and then the body of Christ. So we get all of these reminders of what that space of abundance image does the Garden of Eden really in Genesis, of what that is like to actually see it in our lives, to actually be able to encounter it and be able to experience it.

Tim: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, we get one contextualized response of the ancient Israelites. It was the set of symbolic behaviors to participate in holiness through this ritual purity, but all of it was aimed at removing myself from things associated with death and mortality, and dedicating myself to life or purity and the way that their culture can conceive of it.

This is from a different dictionary entry, The New International Dictionary of Old Testament theology and Ex-Jesus. That's the title of this dictionary.

Jon: Does it have an acronym that goes along with it?

Tim: NIDOTTE.

Jon: NIDOTTE?

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Tim: So ridiculous. Anyway. In their entry on kadosh or holiness - this is Jackie Node who wrote this essay - he cites theologian Rudolf Otto, which I don't know that much about him, but he wrote a book called The Idea of the Holy or Concept of the Holy. He's summarizing the Old Testament on holiness, and he summarizes these characteristics of the Divine in this way. "A majesty, vitality, otherness, and compelling fascination," are the way he summarizes the character traits in the Old Testament that make God holy.

Jon: Wait. The trait is fascination?

Tim: A compelling fascinations. What he's saying is, when people have these encounters with the Holy God like Isaiah or Moses, compelling fascination. So they're fascinated I think maybe in a technical sense of that word.

Paul: Yeah. Almost like hypnotized.

Tim: Totally, yeah. That's it.

Paul: They're held there. Their attention is—

Jon: Kind of like what you're talking about with the ocean.

Tim: Yeah, that's it. I was compellingly fascinated. Then he says this. He says, "The pre—

Jon: Oh hold on. Fascinated, bewitched comes from enchanted is it the Latin fascinators to enchant? A charm.

Paul: Yeah. For something else to hold power over your attention.

Tim: Yeah, that's it. That's good. Then he goes on and he says, "Different sections of the Old Testament call for a different response to this God. The priestly tradition and he means here Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, requires a response of purity and cleanness."

But then he says, "The prophetic tradition demands a response of social justice, a social cleanness or social purity. The wisdom books stress the cleanness of our inner integrity and individual moral act." That was kind of helpful to say different parts of the Bible call towards a different realization of the ideal.

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Jon: What is it again?

[crosstalk 00:36:06]

Tim: In the priestly texts it's the symbolic behaviors, ritual purity. The prophetic books, it's a cleanness or purity of social behavior.

Jon: It's like righteousness.

Tim: Think Amos. The righteousness flow like a river, that kind of thing. Then in the wisdom books, it's about a cleanness of inner integrity and moral decision. I just thought that was very helpful.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So what we're isolating, God is the abundant whole complete one.

Jon: Kadosh.

Tim: And different parts of the Bible are going to use different vocabulary and different environments, practices to push humans to be better image bearers of that God. A whole bunch of the Bible uses the language of purity and holiness to do that.

[00:36:53]

Jon: I hope you enjoyed this episode of The Bible Project podcast. Next week, we'll finish this conversation on the Christian Ideal of Holiness. If you'd like to check out our theme video on holiness, there's a link to it in our show notes.

We also have lots of other videos on our YouTube page. It's youtube.com/thebibleproject. You could find our entire library there. You could also find it on our website, thebibleproject.com.

If you're enjoying this podcast, feel free to leave us a review. It's actually really helpful in other people discovering this podcast.

Also, Tim now has his own podcast, a compilation of his lectures and sermons over the years. It's called "Exploring my Strange Bible." A great episode to start with if you haven't listened to any of Tim's sermons is an episode called

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Science and Faith. Make sure to check that out and thanks for being a part of this with us.