

Our Holy God

Isaiah 6:1-8

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As a young boy I was really bored in church. My mom would give us pep talks every Sunday morning in an effort to remind us to pay attention and not goof around. Unfortunately, I often disregarded her instruction. I was either yawning out loud, poking my sisters, making faces at the minister, or laughing about something that seemed funny – and you know how hard it is to stop laughing in church, don't you?

My mom had a go-to punishment for bad church behavior. She wouldn't say anything in the car – which was my first clue that there was something wrong. And then, when we'd pull into the driveway, she'd say something like this, *“Because you didn't pay attention during mass, you need to have your own personal church time with God. Go and kneel in front of the TV for 30 minutes and tell God about your bad behavior.”*

The reason we had to kneel in front of the TV was because there were some statues on top of it – I think Joseph and Mary and maybe even a statue of Jesus were there. We were instructed to fold our hands and pray silently for the entire time. My sisters didn't receive this punishment very often. Let's just say that I learned how to turn the Packers game on and turn it off quickly whenever I heard my mom making her way to the living room!

Church was a drag to me – and frankly God seemed boring as well. It was C.S. Lewis who said, *“How little people know who think holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible.”*

Once, as an experiment, Isaac Newton stared at the image of the sun reflected in a mirror. The brightness burned into his retina, and he suffered temporary blindness. Even after he stayed behind closed doors for three days, the bright spot would not fade from his vision.

I pray that you and I would have a similar experience as we fix our gaze on the penetrating purity of the holiness of God. May His brightness burn into our lives in such a way that it would never fade from our vision. May we find His holiness beautiful and not boring.

I came across a quote that could have been written today: *“I have had a deep conviction for many years that practical holiness and entire self-consecration to God are not sufficiently attended to by modern Christians in this country. Politics, or controversy, or party spirit, or worldliness have eaten out the heart of lively piety in too many of us.”*

This statement was actually made by J.C. Ryle in 1879!

I want to say that just because I’m drawn to the topic of God’s holiness, that doesn’t mean that I am therefore a holy man. In fact, as I have prepared I have become aware that the reason I have a deep hunger to learn of the holiness of God is because I am *not holy*. I’ve tasted just enough of God’s holy majesty to want more.

The word holy means, *“to divide, to mark off, set apart from all else.”* Our English root refers to that which is whole and complete. Used of God, holiness is that which divides God from everyone and everything else. God’s holiness refers both to His majesty and His moral purity.

In Exodus 15:11, after God parted the Red Sea, Moses asked, ***“Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”*** The awesomeness of the Almighty is His majestic holiness. Revelation 15:4: ***“Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.”*** A.W. Pink adds, *“He only is independently, infinitely, immutably holy.”*

We could call God’s holiness His transcendent attribute because it runs through all the rest. His justice is a holy justice, His love a holy love, His power a holy power.

As we approach this topic, let’s admit that we don’t really understand God’s holiness like we should. A.W. Tozer said it like this: *“We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God’s power and admire His wisdom, but His holiness he cannot even imagine.”*

In order to help us focus on our holy God, we’re going to unpack Isaiah 6:1-8. If you have your Bibles, please turn there. Let’s listen to God’s Word now (read by Rick and Vikki Huisman, Megan Bill, and Nick Castillo).

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the

seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!' And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.' And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'"

Isaiah is called a "major prophet" because of the vast amount of written material that bears his name. He was a statesman, who spoke for God to common people and also to royalty. He prophesied during the reign of four kings over a period of sixty years, which were filled with political controversy, moral decadence and religious indifference.

One of the better kings was Uzziah. He reigned wisely and well for more than four decades. He was able to turn Jerusalem into a fortified city and gave the people a great sense of security.

But the story of Uzziah ends on a sad note according to 2 Chronicles 26:16, ***"But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense."*** Because he arrogantly claimed for himself the rights that God had given only to the priests, God struck him with leprosy, he was removed from his throne and he spent his remaining years shouting out, *"Unclean! Unclean!"*

One of my fears is that I would flame out because so many pastors start out strong and then end up compromising doctrinally or morally as they get older. One well-known pastor in the Chicago area recently resigned just months before his planned retirement amidst allegations of impropriety.

In spite of the shame of his later years, when King Uzziah died, it became a time of national mourning and tremendous uncertainty. In the same year that his king died, Isaiah went to the temple presumably to find some consolation. He got more than he bargained for.

The best way for us to understand holiness is by seeing how holiness affects the unholy. Meeting God is never a casual event. And it certainly is not boring.

We can summarize Isaiah's experience this way:

- He saw the Lord's majesty (6:1-4)
- He confessed his own misery (6:5)
- He received the Lord's mercy (6:6-7)
- He accepted the Lord's mission (6:8)
- He spoke the Lord's message (6:9-13)

See the Lord's Majesty (6:1-4)

In the context of an empty throne, the first thing Isaiah saw was the Lord's *majesty*. Look at **6:1**: ***“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.”*** The word “Lord” is the title Adonai, which has reference to His absolute sovereignty as King of Kings. Isaiah lost his hero and in the process, found the Holy One. To be ***“high and lifted up”*** means there is nothing above God.

Isaiah is saying something like this: *“In the year that we lost our human king, I saw the real King.”* There's no reason to panic when God is on the throne. It may have looked to Isaiah as if everything was falling apart but the Sovereign One was holding everything together. His kingship is infinitely superior to that of Uzziah or anyone else. In the midst of this chaotic time, God makes a personal appearance.

Imagine what it must have been like for Isaiah to see the Lord high and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. I love watching brides come down the aisle as the train of their gown flows behind them. When Princess Diana got married her train was 25 feet long. Not to be undone, a bride from Romania had a train that was 1.85 miles long! But that's nothing like God's train that literally filled every section of the temple. Back then, the length of one's train was an indication of status and importance.

Isaiah describes what he saw next, ***“Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.”*** The seraphim are mentioned only in this passage and are most certainly not sweet chubby babies with wings. They are a certain group of angels whose personal calling was to attend to God's holiness. The word ***“seraph”***

means, “*to burn.*” They covered their faces because they were in the presence of holiness. Covered feet denotes their humility and flying indicates their ongoing obedience to go wherever God sends them.

The most incredible thing about them is not their appearance but their message. They cried out in antiphonal adoration in verse 3, “***And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.’***”

When we want to emphasize the importance of something in English, we underline, use italics, boldface or capital letters. We may then follow it with an exclamation point or two.

The Jewish people used repetition when they wanted to emphasize something. To say a word three times in succession is to elevate it to the superlative degree. When the angels say, “***holy, holy, holy,***” they are emphasizing the breathtaking splendor of God’s holiness!

Are you aware this is the only attribute of God that is repeated three times? The Bible never says God is love, love, love or light, light, light, or truth, truth, truth, or mercy, mercy, mercy. But it does say that He’s *holy, holy, holy*.

I’m reminded of the time the disciples came to Jesus in Matthew 6:9 and said, “***Teach us to pray.***” Jesus answered by saying, “***Here’s how to pray. Our Father in heaven hallowed be Thy name.***” Hallowed means holy.

Look at the last phrase of verse 3: “***...the whole earth is full of his glory.***” The word “***glory***” refers to His weightiness. How can he be high and lifted up and still be right here with us? Theologians refer to this as His transcendence – He is separate from us; and He is immanent – He is close to us. He is to be *feared* and He is our *friend*. He is *powerful* and *personal*.

Check out verse 4: “***And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.***” The entire temple begins to tremble. It’s like an erupting volcano. Smoke indicates that he is in the purifying presence of God. This is a manifestation of His tremendous majestic holiness, much like the shekinah glory cloud in the wilderness.

Confess Your Misery (6:5)

Once we get a sense of God's majesty, we must then confess our misery. We see this in verse 5: ***“And I said: ‘Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!’”***

What was Isaiah's reaction when he came face to face with God's majesty? Instead of yawning, he started yelling, ***“Woe is me!”*** On the lips of a prophet, the word woe is a warning of coming judgment, a declaration of doom. Jesus used it in Matthew 24 when he said, ***“Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees.”*** It's telling that Isaiah doesn't point to someone else and say, *“Woe is he!”* but rather points to himself and says, *“Woe is me!”* When he sees the holiness of God, he confesses his own unholiness.

And then he says, ***“I am lost,”*** which means to be annihilated, or destroyed. I like the KJV: ***“I am undone.”*** Isaiah was devastated by the holiness of God and starts to fall apart. He's coming loose at the seams. Why? Because he saw God as holy, and for the first time in his life he saw himself as unholy.

John Calvin once said, *“Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance until they have confronted themselves with the majesty of God.”*

As long as Isaiah could compare himself with other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was morally and spiritually annihilated.

The most important instrument of a prophet was his mouth. Seeing his own polluted depravity, Isaiah cries out, ***“I am a man of unclean lips.”*** It's interesting that he calls himself unclean in light of how King Uzziah would have spent his last years shouting out that he was unclean. This is incredible to me because as a prophet what came out of his mouth was supposed to be the words of God.

Listen, no one can stand in the presence of God without becoming profoundly and devastatingly aware of his own wretched sinfulness. In other words, until we understand the holiness of God, we won't understand our own depravity. To see even the smallest glimpse of God's holiness is to be destroyed and wiped out. Isaiah would never be the same again.

Tozer writes: *“If I haven’t felt the sense of vilenss by contrast with that sense of unapproachable and indescribable holiness, I wonder if I have ever been hit hard enough to really repent. And if I don’t repent, I wonder if I can believe.”*

No one ever comes before the holiness of God without devastation. The prophet Habakkuk learned this the hard way. After approaching God rather boldly and demanding an answer to some of his questions, Habakkuk 3:16 records what happens when God finally answers him: ***“I hear and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me...”*** When was the last time you trembled and your heart pounded in the presence of God?

If we could see only a portion of what Isaiah saw, we would be changed forever. Many of us are bored with God because we don’t understand Who He really is, and because we don’t understand Who He is, we don’t understand our own depravity. And without owning our misery, we won’t see our need for mercy.

Receive the Lord’s Mercy (6:6-7)

Look at verse 6 and notice what happens at the *very* moment Isaiah owned his sin – ***“Then...”*** Mercy is set in motion at the exact time Isaiah recognizes his misery, ***“...one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.”***

Now watch this in verse 7: ***“And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”*** God does not leave Isaiah devastated – He does something about it.

This hot coal was taken from the altar, where sacrifices were offered. This foresees the deliverance that the final sacrifice, the Lamb of God, made as He laid down His life for us.

Isaiah heard the praise of the seraphim and their thunderous song, which shook the very foundation of the Temple. But what did God hear? He heard the faint, fearful cry of a miserable man. When God hears Isaiah, he sends a seraph with a message of mercy. As Psalm 51:7 reminds us: ***“A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”***

Our lips are sensitive and tender. And it is to that very part of the body that the angel places a hot coal and sears the flesh. You can almost hear them sizzle and

burn, along with the muffled screams from Isaiah. True salvation is always painful because it involves wrestling about who will ultimately be in control of our lives. Grace is free...but it is not cheap. And there's a cost to following Christ.

Accept the Lord's Mission (6:8)

Isaiah first saw the Lord's *majesty*. Then, as he was overcome with the *misery* of his own sinfulness, he experienced the Lord's *mercy*. Now, in verse 8, he accepts the Lord's *mission*: "***And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'***" In ancient near east religions, only divine beings were sent as messengers of the gods but the God of the Bible uses human messengers.

In accepting the Lord's mission, Isaiah is first *sensitive* to His voice – "***I heard the voice of the Lord...***" Up to this point he had seen the glory of God; he had heard the song of the seraphim; he had felt the burning coal upon his lips. Now for the first time he heard the voice of God. Suddenly the angels were silent, and the voice that boomed through the temple echoed with some piercing questions: "***Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?***" The Hebrew is in the plural, giving Old Testament evidence for the existence of the Trinity.

After being *sensitive* to the voice of God, Isaiah *surrenders* to God's call. The last thing he declared was woe and now he is ready to go! The only way we will live on mission is when we are cleansed by the mercy of God and overwhelmed by the majesty of God.

Notice Isaiah's immediate answer. "***Here I am. Send me.***" He's not so much giving God his location as He is surrendering to his vocation. He's making himself available as an ambassador of the Almighty. By asking God to send him, He's demonstrating His unconditional surrender as a servant.

God is still looking for people who have been so moved by His majesty, for those who have experienced His mercy in light of their misery, that they are ready to join in His mission.

Speak the Lord's Message (6:9-13)

Notice the first part of verse 9, "***Go, and say to this people...***" God is eager to have us go, to be sent as Isaiah was into His mission field. Our mission is very similar to Isaiah's – and was given to us by Jesus right before He ascended into

heaven in Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”***

The message Isaiah was given was not received with gladness by the people. But that didn't stop him from going and giving it. Look at the rest of verse 9 and verse 10: ***“...Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”*** The proud will be hardened while the humble will hear Him. Jesus quotes this exact passage in John 12 to explain why many did not believe in Him.

Are you *sensitive* to His voice? Are you *surrendered* to His mission? I don't know what exactly that will mean for you personally, but I do know that we've been given a task to *go* and make disciples of our neighbors and of all nations.

It was D.L. Moody who said, *“I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And that which I can do by the grace of God, I will do.”*

- That's why we've heard from Go team partners in India and Japan the past two weeks.
- That's why we're sending a team to Puerto Rico this month and another team to India in October. We'll be hearing reports from the Fresno and Canada teams next weekend.
- That's why we're focusing on Grow Time this fall.

While Isaiah's message wasn't received well, it was filled with messages about the Messiah. From the remnant, will come the redeemer. Here are just a few...

7:14 – ***“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”***

9:6 – ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”***

53:5 – “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”

Amazingly, when Isaiah saw the majesty of God, John 12:41 says he saw Jesus himself: ***“Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.”***

And so, we must start with our gaze *upward* so we see the majesty of God. Only then can we see ourselves *inwardly*. Once we admit our misery and accept His mercy, we can then move *outward* by living on mission as ambassadors of His message.

Chip Ingram says it much better than I can: *“An upward, accurate view of God, high and holy, leads to an inward, accurate view of yourself as fallen short and desperately needing God’s forgiveness, which in turn leads to an outward view of your life being about God’s agenda instead of yours, and your life being about the needs of other people instead of you and your little world.”*

You may need to spend some time on your knees not in front of some statues, but on your face in front of our holy God. God’s holiness is intended to have a practical impact on our lives. 1 Peter 1:16 says, ***“You shall be holy, for I am holy.”***

As a way to keep this series practical, we’re asking this question: *“How should the knowledge that God is holy change the way I live?”*

If we don’t change, we’ll have nothing to say. You cannot help someone by just commiserating with them and sharing their misery. If you go, then you must go, knowing you have what they need to hear. If you have been overwhelmed with God’s *majesty*, have felt your *misery*, been impacted by His *mercy*, and have surrendered to His *mission*, then by all means, go with his *message*.

Last summer an unusual song made it to the Top 50 on iTunes. The track, which costs 99 cents, is titled, *“A a a a a Very Good Song”* and includes almost ten full minutes of silence. Not a single musical instrument, voice or sound of any kind can be heard...and people love it. I guess you can’t really put a price on silence.

Here’s how we’re going to end today. We’re going to have a time where we sit in silence and then after a few minutes we’re going to sing, *“Holy is the Lord.”*

Holy is the Lord

Commission Celebrate Recovery Team – Pastor Dan, Amanda Hodge, Bud Lyford and Arturo Villagomez

Benediction from Isaiah 57:15: *“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”*