

The Holiness of God: Woe Is Me!
By Jason Huff
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Hebrews 12:14; Matthew 5:17-20; Isaiah 6:1-8

Our final Scripture reading this week is from Isaiah 6:1-8. May God bless the reading of His perfect, sacred, and holy word. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

If you've been with us recently, you know we've been walking through the book of Genesis, and last week we saw Jacob go on the run from his vengeful brother Esau. You might be thinking, "Where did they go?" They'll be back following Easter, I promise; we'll get to the rest of the story! But for the next few weeks, I want to shift gears. While it is really good to study a book of the Bible in-depth and get to its heart to see what God has been doing throughout history, as we head towards Easter I wanted us to get an overview of a theme that is incredibly important throughout Scripture, one that if we understand it will guide our entire view of God and our reading of every Scripture we come across. That theme that we're going to be talking about for the next several weeks is the holiness of God.

You might have guessed that from the songs we've sung this morning, but there's far more than just the word "holy" being thrown around. We hear about things being holy – we might think about the so-called "holy grail" that King Arthur's knights were obsessed about. In other religions outside of Christianity, you often hear of a "holy man" being a spiritual leader. Those of us old enough to remember the Batman show in the '60s or to see it in reruns remember Robin's catchphrase, where everything incredible made him say, "Holy Toledo, Batman," or "Holy Explosion, Batman!" (Can you believe there were 359 variations on that catchphrase? That's a lot of holy!)

But we don't really have a grip on holiness, or what something being holy is, or why holiness is important. Most of us just expect that holiness means that something is related to God. And while that's right, there's so much more to it. In fact, I'd go so far to say that if you do not understand holiness, you can't fully understand the gospel. If you do not understand holiness, you will miss why God has done all that He has done throughout the centuries. But understanding holiness will radically change the way we approach God and our faith. It will change the way we live. It will reframe our every point of reference. In our sermon today and in coming weeks, we want the big picture of holiness, more than bullet points or discipleship ideas.

Before we go any further, I want to acknowledge that I am indebted to the late R.C. Sproul on this topic. He literally wrote the book on the subject called *The Holiness of God*, and while I'm doing my best not to plagiarize him in any way or copy his thought patterns, his book has affected me deeply over the years and I'm reading it again as I preach this series. So I encourage you to pick up a copy, and when this sermon series is over, read it and be reminded of all the good things we did cover and learn all the things I won't be able to cover.

Now we can be told what holiness is by definition. From simple description, "holiness" is something that can be attributed to or related to God. To practice holiness is to act in a way like God acts. To be holy is to be like God or set apart for God's use. Simple enough. But the Bible isn't a dictionary; the Bible gives us vivid descriptions of who God is and what God is like and what God expects. We can state the idea of holiness in a short phrase, but we can't grasp holiness that way. God wanted us to understand at least in a basic way His nature, and so when He inspired the authors of Scripture, spoke to them, gave them visions, inspired their words on the page, He gives us vivid descriptions of what His holiness truly means.

So let's set the stage for what we're about to see. The nation of Israel is split into northern and southern kingdoms. The southern kingdom has a good king, King Uzziah, who has reigned for 52 years in Jerusalem, and the majority of his reign he was walking in God's ways. Uzziah had a tragic end, though. He was struck with leprosy when he decided that he could burn incense to God on the altar in the temple, which was a job only for the clan of Levi, the appointed priests. He spent his last days living apart from others and from the temple of God.

He is dead, and now there's the question of what will happen next. Because I don't care who you are, it's hard to follow a king who's been in power over half a century. Isaiah is unusual among the prophets in that he is a well-known statesman who has access to the people in power. He would have been the leader people are going to in this time of national mourning and potential crisis. When Isaiah has this vision, the future of the southern kingdom is at stake.

Suddenly we are reminded that the earthly king doesn't matter because we know the true King over Israel. Every part of this vision lays out for us the grandeur and splendor and might of the LORD. Isaiah has a vision of God seated high upon His throne in His temple, and the train of His robe fills it entirely. About the only time we see a train on clothing is at a wedding, right? It's flowing off the bride, and it's a symbol of beauty and honor and power. At one point in history, the length of a bride's train symbolized the class and wealth of the bride's family because who could afford all that material that wasn't even necessary? It was a physical sign of their supposed value. Well, God's train takes up the entirety of the temple. For someone of Isaiah's day, it symbolized His royal power and kingship far surpassing anything anyone on earth could possibly imagine.

Then we have these wild beings, angels of a sort, called seraphs, who are flying above the Lord, almost as His royal heralds, proclaiming who it is we see. These beings were made for this tasks by God specially. They have six wings – two are for flying, like we might imagine of an angel. Two are for covering their feet, which in Hebrew can just mean feet, but it can also mean any hidden or unmentionable part of the body. So one part of them exists for their dignity before God.

Then they have two wings just for covering their faces. The seraphs exist in the presence of God all the time, it would appear. But they are not directly looking at the Lord. In fact, God made them in such a way that they could be in His presence but not be in danger of looking at His face. Not only is it for their safety, it is to show their humility, so that while they are not made to bow before the Lord as His heralds, they still do not look directly at God and in doing so make Him their equal. Everything about them is made to honor God and to protect them from the incredible power of who God is.

What they cry out to each other is “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” This triple repetition is something we cannot fail to miss. The Hebrew language creates emphasis by repetition. You might hear the benediction I use often from Numbers 6:24-26, and part of it says, “May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you and grant you His peace.” Well, “countenance” and “face” mean the same thing, right? The two phrases aren’t quite identical, but they mean the same thing, and it’s for emphasis. Jesus was known for saying, “Truly, truly I say to you.” He was emphasizing the importance of what He was about to say. Happens a lot in Hebrew and when Jewish writers who knew Hebrew as their first language write and speak in Greek.

The triple repetition is rare in Scripture. It is the utmost of truth and emphasis. And what is God? Holy, holy, holy. No other attribute of God ever reaches the third degree. Not love, not justice, not mercy, not grace, not kindness, not wrath, not longsuffering, not compassion. Only holiness. Beyond anything else, God is holy. Everything – everything! – (and see, I’m emphasizing by repetition) – **everything** else about God is in light of His holiness. Sometimes we wonder, “Why can’t God be all love and not judgment?” Because He is holy. Why does God only save through Jesus and not through other means, other spiritual beliefs? Because He is holy. Why do so many people talk about not only loving and serving but fearing the Lord? Because He is holy. How can God love those who hate Him and save those who would otherwise entirely reject Him? Because He is holy.

Holiness isn’t the same as perfection. God is perfect, but God’s holiness is even beyond that. God is pure, but it’s more than that too. The tension that God holds between all those different things that He is that sometimes seem like opposites – loving and wrathful, kind and just, merciful and punishing, graceful and reconciling and condemning – comes from His perfection but also from His holiness. The reason that we cannot fathom how He holds all these things in perfect measure is because He is holy and we are not.

Holiness is wonderful, but it is also otherness. It is transcendence. God is completely unique and completely unlike us. He is not created. He is eternal in and of Himself. He does not change His mind. He is the arbiter of right and wrong, good and evil – He is the truth. He is so different, so other, that He must act to reveal Himself for us to know Him. The creation reveals Him because He chooses it to do so. We are made in the image of God, not the other way around. He is so different from us, in fact, that we can barely fathom Him. The greatest minds our world has had to offer have written thousands of pages about God and yet do not begin to contemplate the whole of who God is. We have no means to comprehend all of Him. He is separate, other, perfect. He is holy, holy, holy.

And when the truth of God is revealed, when the word goes out from the seraph that God is in the building, its very foundations shake. The building trembles at not even the voice of God but the proclamation of His holiness. Smoke fills every corner. I don't know if you've ever been to a modern concert, sometimes praise and worship concerts even, where there are smoke machines and lasers and big speakers. I've been to some loud shows before, I've been at a Christian concert where I felt the bass messing with my ribs. But you know what? We're just missing with gadgets and mirrors.

I have never been anywhere where just the mention of God and His presence was so enormous that I feared the roof would cave in. Where the presence of God is so real, where His glory is so obvious, that we can't even move. We sing some of these songs that ask God to reveal Himself, to show us His glory, and thankfully we do have that in Christ, we do have a way through Jesus to approach, I love some of those songs, but I'm not sure we really have any clue what we're asking for. If we had a clue, we'd be a lot more careful about how we approached the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah is in the middle of all this. He sees the Lord. Let me say again – he sees the Lord. And just like the foundations of the temple, Isaiah is shaken to His core. He exclaims, “Woe is me!” If you ever hear anyone say, “Woe is me,” these days, it usually comes with a list of complaints about how hard life has gotten, a list of bad things. But this is different. Isaiah is proclaiming his own curse. He's not cursing himself, I don't think; he's stating the obvious. He is cursed. Now we would tend to think, “Oh, he's seen the Lord – he's blessed!” And because of Jesus, because we stand in a different part of history, if we were talking about a person now getting to see Jesus in a dream or vision, yes, that would be a blessing. That is not what we are talking about here.

Isaiah states he is cursed because he knows a few things as a prophet. One is that, despite being Israel's foremost prophet at the time, considered one of the most righteous people in his generation, he is a sinner. He is a man of unclean lips. This isn't like, “Oh, Isaiah occasionally said a curse word.” Isaiah the prophet gets a glimpse of the utter holiness of God and his eyes are opened and he realizes that his own righteousness is nothing in comparison. His choice of words is important – it's not just that he's sinned, but that those sins have made him unclean. The law of God made it abundantly clear that nothing that was unclean could ever be offered to God as a sacrifice, and no unclean or ritually impure person could enter the temple courts. Not only that, but his lips were the tools of his ministry to the people of God. The very center of his message was unclean. The core of this righteous man of the age was uncleanness. And if that is true of himself, it is true of the people he serves and is a part of.

And the curse is severe. He wails, “I am ruined!” This is a hard word to translate. Some translations say, “I am lost,” “I am pricked to the heart,” “my destruction is sealed,” and maybe most closely, “I am undone.” The word in other contexts means to be destroyed, cut off, to perish. His mental picture of himself has been ripped to shreds; his integrity lies tattered on the floor; he is cut to the quick. He has seen the Lord and as a person, he falls apart. The experience is so overwhelming that he is beside himself. And he thinks he knows his fate – as God told Moses in Exodus 33:20, “You cannot see my face, for no human being can see my face and live.” If Moses, the greatest prophet of God to that point, couldn't, what hope does Isaiah have?

As R.C. Sproul states it, “There was nowhere to hide. His was pure moral anguish, the kind that rips the heart out of a man and tears his soul to pieces. Guilt, guilt, guilt. Relentless guilt screamed from his every pore.” But he goes on to say, “The holy God is also a God of grace. He took immediate steps to cleanse the man and restore his soul.”

Thankfully, God makes it so Isaiah does not die, that not only can Isaiah stand in His presence, but that Isaiah can fully become His ambassador to the Jewish people. Isaiah will become the foremost prophet to the southern kingdom, and he will be given several prophecies that relate directly to Jesus, including His birth, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. God cleanses Isaiah through the work of the seraph, who symbolically burns away his sin with a coal from God’s altar.

This sounds strange, and it is; this is not part of the sacrifices God gave to Israel in the law. In every circumstance, a sacrifice of life – the life of a bull or ram or dove – took the place of the guilty party. Here, there is a coal from the altar that stands for purification. Yet the coal does not burn him; it cleanses him. We will see this pattern in Jesus, who touches the unclean and makes them clean, rather than becoming unclean Himself. We’ll look at this more in one of the weeks ahead. But I don’t believe that Isaiah was cleansed by a sacrifice; He was cleansed by Jesus, whose blood pays for all who believe throughout all of time.

What I want us to grasp this week is the sheer immensity, the gravity, the weight, of God’s holiness. Over and over again, the Bible speaks about one of the core virtues of a righteous person being “the fear of the LORD.” If we grasp one thing today, perhaps it is starting to develop a healthy fear of the LORD. This is not terror. This is not a fear where we want to run away and hide as if we were being pursued in a horror movie. Proper fear towards God is to show Him the respect and honor He deserves, to come before Him aware of Him and to be humbled in His presence.

As a group, the American people are not fearful of the LORD. We play with faith. Surprisingly, while the numbers of people in church are down, the numbers of atheists isn’t rising a ton. We now have a huge group who when asked about their faith group say “none in particular,” but the vast majority of them are still by their own word “spiritual.” We feel we don’t need a church. We can have our own private faith that we can practice when and where we want to. 67% of Americans consider themselves religious, but only 22% attend church every week. Can you fear God and yet only come to worship Him an hour a month?

And what do we get when we come to church? Are we meeting with the living God? Are we hearing His word preached faithfully? Do the songs truly reflect who God is? Is there time for silence to hear from God, for the reading of the word, for confession, for responding? Does our worship have gravitas? Certainly we can have joy in the Lord, but does our worship take God seriously? Or is our worship nothing more than an extension of Saturday night’s concert out in the world? Are we so concerned to offend other people that we wind up offending God instead?

Friends, as we study the holiness of God more to come in the weeks ahead, may we begin to have a sense of what that truly means. May we be awestruck at the holiness of God. May we come to worship not to punch a clock and say that we did our duty for God, but may we come expectant that God, the God who created us, the God of all time and space, the transcendent One, the Holy One, will meet with us, not because we are righteous but because His Son has made it possible. May we learn what it means to tremble with proper fear before the Lord and know His loving hand of forgiveness and fathership upon us.