

Meeting God

The Gospel According to Isaiah

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Bible Text: Isaiah 6

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Please take your Bibles and turn to Isaiah, chapter 6. I wonder what it would be like to meet someone famous or someone that you admire or respect or perhaps a person you admire and respect would not be somebody famous. But whatever, it's been my privilege over the years to meet a number of people who were, I suppose, relatively famous. I once shook hands with the President of France. Hmm. The Prince of Wales, I will say no more. With a young man who was to run as a potential Vice President of the United States. They were all actually impressive in their own way and they were certainly famous. Where we lived in London, in Richmond, it was regular to see on the streets people whose faces you recognize and after you smiled at them you realized you had recognized them but there's no way they would have ever known you because you recognize them because you saw them in the theater. Johnny Depp used my study at church as a dressing room. Madonna came into a café where I was sitting with her children. We saw regularly Hollywood stars who were in London filming and they were using Richmond as their hangout. Sometimes, of course, it was an impressive sight. Other times it was underwhelming. Therefore, you see, because at the end of the day whether you're a President or a Vice Presidential running mate or a prince or a princess or a rock star or a rock diva, for that matter, at the end of the day you're just a person.

We're talking this morning about meeting God. I know immediately, of course, our ideas of what meeting someone are different from anything that we can apply to any other relationship or meeting that we might have. When we say we're meeting God, we're actually talking about something that all of us are going to do. All of us are going to do. We are all going to meet God one day as our Judge. This makes the question absolutely critical that we must know today where we stand before him so that on that day the issue is resolved. We have to get ready for that day. This really is in many ways the subject of this chapter. We looked at it last time and we're coming back again to look more closely at its central thought, its central theme, is captured by the Seraphim. I like to think of the singing Seraphim as a kind of band or a group, singing the praise of God. There they are, the singing Seraphim and Isaiah does not describe them, he describes what they do. He describes their actions but he cannot tell you really what they look like because they belong to a different category than anything we can compare with. He tells us he has a vision. With his eyes wide open, not in sleep, but his eyes wide open, he sees the Lord. He sees the temple. But he sees beyond the temple as if the temple itself has been

expanded from that little bit of real estate on Mount Zion. He sees above it and beyond it and he sees the heavenly temple intersecting with that earthly temple. He tells us that he sees the glory of the Lord. It's his glory that fills the temple and he hears these creatures, the Seraphim who belong, as I said, to a different category of being than our own, he hears these Seraphim singing this great and exalted song, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, is Yahweh of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory."

Two words that are important: holy and glory. He begins and ends with these two words that express the utter, overwhelming otherness of God. And you notice the repetition. In the Hebrew language, repetition was important because they had no other ways or devices to draw attention to the importance of something or the significance of something. We may underline it, we might put it all in capital letters or all in italics or put quotes around it or an exclamation point after it, but in Hebrew the way you underline something was you repeated it. For example, in 2 Kings 25, it talks about gold, solid gold. Actually, in the Hebrew it talks about gold gold. There is gold and there is gold gold. Gold gold is the genuine stuff, it's full of carats and it's very expensive, it is the real thing. Back in Genesis 14, we read about a bunch of people who had been in a war with Abraham and they are running away from Abraham and in the English Standard Version, it says that as they are making their escape, they fell into the bitumen pits in that region. Actually in the Hebrew, it just says they fell into the pit pits because apparently there are pits and there are pit pits. It's one thing to fall into a pit but if you fall into a pit pit, you've fallen into the pitious pit of them all and that's bad news. But here we find in this song of the Seraphim, here we find an attribute of God that is magnified to the most superlative position possible, the triple holiness of God. Here is the total truth about God. It may very well be underlining something about the nature of God as the Father and the Son and the Spirit, it may very well be doing that but it's also underlining, "This is the total truth about God. He is holy, holy, holy, Yahweh of hosts."

As we learn in this chapter, holiness has to do with everything that sets God above us and makes him awesome to us. Holiness has to do with everything that sets God apart from us and makes him different from us. Holiness has to do with everything that sets God against us and makes him terrible to us. And holiness has to do with everything that sets God after us and shows him gracious to us. Let's look at those things together. Holiness has to do with all that sets God above us and makes him awesome to us. Notice the context of the song, it's all about God on his throne, "I saw the Lord," he says in verse 1, "sitting on a throne high and lifted up." Again in verse 5, "my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts, Yahweh of armies! I have seen the Lord of hosts." Here is the description of the holy God. He is above us. He is above us in majesty. He is the King who reigns and sits on this throne of the universe. In his vision, Isaiah in the temple, beginning with the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant which was the footstool of God, sees the throne of God, as it were, extending upwards and outwards to fill the universe like an inverted pyramid. From that point moving upwards, outwards, filling the expanse of the universe was the throne of God and God sitting on that throne. It is a vision of the greatness, the bigness, the majesty, the sheer enormity and the infinity of God as he reigns over all. This is majestic sovereignty. Here is consuming majesty. Here is exalted loftiness. Here is God holy.

Now, that word "holy" means "to cut," and what Isaiah is saying is this: God is an infinite cut above everybody and everything else there is. He is above us therefore he is awesome to us. Ezekiel had a similar vision. The priest prophet Ezekiel saw God's throne coming towards him at a frightening rate of knots, moving and acting like some great living object with the cherubim gathered around with whirring wheels that denoted the endless energy of God moving from Jerusalem out there to the desert where Ezekiel and the exiles were in their captivity, moving towards them, the throne of God and he says that there was one with a human figure sitting on that throne and he was high above him. He was huge. He was enormous. He was great. He was majestic. In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John sees a throne and sees someone sitting on that throne and he sees that the one sitting on that throne is in charge of history. He's in charge of the book of destiny which when it is opened, unseals the story of humanity from the beginning to the end of time, the one who's in charge is sitting on the throne.

Now, when you see God on the throne, when you have a vision of the majesty of God, that is enormously threatening to us. It's threatening to those who don't know him, whose sins have not been cleansed. But it is also wonderfully stabilizing for the people of God so that when the early Christians are being persecuted by the same forces that had crucified their Master, Jesus, and are determined now to eradicate this fledgling Christian movement, when the early Christians think about those realities, they then turn their minds to think about the King, the sovereign Lord. They use that very language and they remind themselves as they pray to him that whatever is happening around them in the world, whatever the chaos that is raging outside as evil people try to plot their downfall and their demise, that everything they do like everything they did to Jesus, they do according to the plan and the purpose that God has determined should happen. He is on the throne and he reigns. He reigns in power.

Theologians refer to the transcendence of God, that he's up and out and bigger and above all of our imagination. Geerhardus Vos talked about the unapproachableness of God. The one thing is true, that people when they encounter God never feel comfortable. They never feel somehow chummy and matey with him the way we are with our friends. There is nothing like that. When people encounter God, they realize that he is distinct from all the other idolatries that we have in our lives and in the world. They are non-entities; they are nothings in comparison to him. In fact, he asks the question, "To whom will you liken me?" The only proper response to God is the response of these cherubim covering their faces, covering themselves. They are reverent before him; they are humble before him. They want to disappear. They want not to be noticed in the presence of God because God takes center stage, he has all the glory. Do you know, that people who know their God are humble before him. Robert Murray M'Cheyne said that no one can at one and the same time think, "I am great and that God is a great God and Jesus is a great Savior." There is no place for thinking that you are especially great. If you believe God is great and that Jesus is a great Savior, it inspires humility in our hearts.

Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne. I want you to notice that in the midst of the chaos of that time, the king is dead, I saw the Lord sitting." The chaos of that moment

in the history of Israel as the end is near, as exile is approaching, as foreign forces are mustering, ready to attack, as their world is about to collapse, the Lord is sitting unperturbed, unmoved. Through all the changing scenes of life and in trouble and in joy, the praises of my God shall still my heart and tongue. Why? Because he remains seated on the throne, in charge, in control and with all the authority, he sits.

Holiness has to do with all that sets God above us and makes him awesome to us. Secondly, holiness has to do with all that sets God apart from us and makes him different from us. What Isaiah discovered is this: God is not us. That's a good thing to learn. For one thing, he has a divine nature, not a human nature. He says through Hosea, "For I am God and not man, the holy one among you." Not only that but he is the Creator and we are the creatures. Our lives are dependent. We are dependent on breath to breathe and food to eat and for the law of gravity so that we don't float off into outer space. We are dependent creatures but God is not dependent on anything or anyone. He is almost totally foreign. Not absolutely foreign because he has made us in his image and there are elements that we share with him: the ability to love, our seeking justice and so on. Those are elements that we share with him because he implanted them in our nature when he made us in his image but God as he is in himself is almost totally foreign to us.

These heavenly beings, you notice, in the presence of God, cover their faces. There are things they cannot look upon. There are things they cannot know or see about God even though they are closest to him. These singing Seraphim are there in the presence of God and yet they cover their eyes because they have to learn to be content with what God has shown them, just as we do. We have to be content with what God has revealed to us in his word. St. Augustine once replied to a man who came to him and asked him the question, "What was God doing before he made the world?" Augustine said to him, "God was making hell for people like you who asked those kind of questions." There are some things we are not permitted to ask. Augustine and Calvin knew this. They realized that we were forbidden; there were areas forbidden to us in the language of the Bible itself. The revealed things are for us, those things that aren't revealed aren't our business, they are God's business. Jim Packer said, "When we reach the outer limits of what Scripture says, it is time to stop arguing and start worshipping."

Do you remember when Yahweh first met with Moses? A burning bush, he said to Moses, "Do not come near. Stop. Take the sandals off your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground," and he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob," and Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look on God. It was holy ground. It wasn't holy ground because it was radioactive as one of the cults said back in the 60s which I remember being told about. No, it's holy ground because God is there. Later on when Israel gathers at Mount Sinai, the mountain is a holy mountain. The people are warned, "Don't stray onto the mountain because if you stray onto the mountain you will be dead because it's a holy mountain." Wherever God comes and he is present, that is a holy place. When he dwells in the Holy of Holies in the temple, that is the Holy of Holies. Then there is the holy place and then there is the holy tabernacle and then there is the holy land and then there is the universe that is full of his glory. Some places God is more intensely present than other places but wherever he is his

holy to a greater or lesser degree. And holiness demonstrates that absolutely every other quality of God is different from ours. We share with him a desire for justice, don't we? But his justice is holy justice. We share with God the ability to love one another and love other people but his love is a holy love. Even in those parts that we share with God, when it comes to thinking about God, we think in different categories. The category we think of when we think of God is, the holy category. He is apart from us, different from us. "To whom will you compare me that I should be like them?" says the holy one. And the answer: nothing, no one.

Thirdly, holiness has to do with all that sets God against us and makes him terrible to us. You see, the word also carries this idea that God is absolutely pure and that his being is profoundly ethical. This is, by the way, one of the reasons why the law of God was revealed to Moses at Sinai. It was the great revelation to all humanity that the God who made Adam in the Garden, made Adam in a covenant relationship with himself that was bounded by law, that was to teach Adam and to teach the rest of humanity that the God with whom they were dealing is a profoundly ethical and moral being and that the fundamental issue that is at stake with humanity is, we have broken the bounds of our covenant relationship with God. We have broken his law. We've abandoned that law and Israel had broken God's law. And because God is against us, that spells trouble for us whose sins are unatoned for because God's glory is manifested in his judgment of sin. He judges sin, our sin, and God's holiness cannot coexist. When we say that God is separate, apart from our sin, we're saying not just that he's apart from it but we have to say he is opposed to it. Not only opposed to sin as if it were some kind of substance. You know this thing that people say very often in a trite way and we know what we mean by it but actually, it's inaccurate, that God loves the sinner and hates the sin. Have you heard that said? Sin is not some kind of objective substance that you can separate from the sinner. God is opposed to the sinner. The wrath of God is revealed against all the unrighteousness and ungodliness of men. That's part of our problem and this is what prompts God to send people like the prophets, like Isaiah, back to his stubborn, rebellious creatures to warn them and to labor the point with them that their relationship with God is not a right relationship.

Now this idea of the holiness of God lay at the very heart of Isaiah's ministry to the people of Judah. Too many people in Judah in his day had mistaken the royal theology of the Davidic king and the coming Davidic king who was to be the Messiah, they had mistaken that theology with his promise of unconditional blessing to David and his offspring, as a kind of blanket approval for all that they did both good and bad. They falsely came up with the idea that God keeps his promises but God does not keep his threats. He would never keep his threats to destroy Zion. He would never keep his threats to devastate his promise and derail his plans. He would never do that. God was stuck with them. He was stuck with them. That's what they thought. For better or for worse. But Isaiah and the prophets are sent back to these people. Isaiah we read in verse 11 of this chapter is to go back and announce that, in fact, the cities will lie ruined and uninhabited and the houses will be left deserted and the fields ruined and ravished and the people sent into exile and the land utterly forsaken. That was the reality of what was going to happen.

God's word had spoken. God is against us because of our sin, that makes him terrible to us.

Isaiah never forgot the day that he sought into the mysterious heart of God and understood that he was the holy one. In fact, from that day forward, his favorite designation of God was as the holy one of Israel. The holy one of Israel. He uses that 12 times in chapters 1 to 39, 14 times in chapters 40 to 66. It's his signature. God is the holy one of Israel. When we say that God is holy, all we're saying is that God is God. God is God.

Now at this point, we can raise a question that is often raised by scholars but maybe you haven't thought of it, and that is why this chapter is where it is in the book. Something that this chapter records, the initial experience that Isaiah had with God back in the very beginning and that it forms his call to Christian service. Some misunderstand that. We understand that there is a point in our lives and certainly there was in mine as a teenager where I came to terms with God's claim on my life, his call on me and it was a very significant moment in my life when I realized that and so people put this, very often this was preached on and I heard this preached, the call of Isaiah. On the other hand, Calvin and others think that, in fact, this experience comes to him after he's already begun his ministry. It looks like that, doesn't it In Isaiah? He's already been preaching and now he comes into the temple. I believe there's a little bit of both involved. I think it's early on in his life. I think he's already started preaching the word and that it's particularly put here because of the issues that are raised in chapters 1 to 5. Chapters 1 to 5, a serious problem has been introduced. A seriously rebellious Israel is under the judgment of God and God is going to send it, God is going to be faithful in keeping his threats. But also in that section, we find promises that there is coming a day when this same people will become a magnet for the nations as they come to learn of God and we ask the question, "How can that turnabout come around?" Chapter 6 provides the solution: sinful Israel can become servant Israel when the experience of Isaiah becomes the experience of the nation. That's how significant this is.

You notice, what's going on here, verse 4, "the foundations of the thresholds shook," the whole temple structure, the inert matter of the door posts, the inanimate thresholds, the wood and the metal that could neither hear nor speak had the good sense to be moved by the presence of God. And Isaiah, verse 5, Isaiah is shaking, quaking in the presence of God because God's appearance to him has been sudden, disruptive, unnerving. He is overwhelmed. What is he overwhelmed by? Notice, his own uncleanness, his unworthiness, his sinfulness. Look at the language he uses, the language of woe; the language of lost; the language of unclean. Calvin says he's reduced to nothing here. He sees he's in deep jeopardy. The effect of seeing God is terrifying. He begins to come apart. He was a prophet. Prophets had the oracles of God, they had a burden of the word of God laid upon their shoulder. Their task was to proclaim that word whether it was good news or bad news. If it was good news, it usually started with a formula that said, "Blessed. Blessed be." Like Jesus did in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God." But if it was a bad news message, it began with the word "woe." Doom, damnation, curse be upon you. And he was a preacher of this message and there

was both the good news and the bad news message and he'd spoken this word just as Jesus would speak both words of blessing and words of cursing. "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites."

Here is the prophet and in the presence of God, he has this vision of God's holiness and the man who preached blessing and cursing to others in the presence of God only has one word for himself in the presence of a holy God, "Woe is me. Damned am I. Doom be upon me. Cursed am I in the presence of God." Because he realized, you see, the depths, the pervasiveness of sin that was in him, it was in everybody. He was devastated. Even that one place where he was most useful to God, where he was most gifted in his speech was at the root the most radical form of his own uncleanness. He learned a significant lesson that some people never learn in all of their lives, he learned that our strengths and our gifts and our talents and our usefulness to God are unclean. They are unclean. We can't take any comfort from them or boast in them because the best we do, the highest we get, is riddled through with uncleanness when exposed to the burning glare of the majesty and purity of God. None of us can stand. None of us can stand. Woe is me.

You see, in a fallen world, beloved, our reason, our talents, our nature, there is nothing that is neutral, nothing that is not affected and effected by sin. Isaiah found God's holiness terrible. He realized that he had no hope with God because of his sin. The amount of it was irrelevant. The nature of it was irrelevant. The awful purity of God. The awful purity of God undid him. Sometimes people complain about having to repeat a confession of sin in church but it's a reminder to all of us that we come here as sinners in need of mercy. Here's the amazing thing about the holiness of God. You think of the Apostle Paul and if you look at his life ministry, you will see him describe himself as one of the apostles, the least of the apostles, less than the least of the apostles, the chief of sinners because the nearer you get to God, the more realistic you get about yourself. The more you hate sin, the more you see it; the more you see it in yourself that you hadn't seen before. It's part of our growth because the closer we get to God, the closer we get to that point where Isaiah was where you stand in the presence of God and you say, "Doomed am I. Damned am I. Cursed am I. Because I see sin as you see it." God is light and in him is no darkness at all. I am not like that. In me is all kinds of darkness in the presence of that burning light of God.

But that's not the end of the story for holiness has to do with all that sets God after us and shows him to be gracious to us. Picture this scene: Humpty Dumpty, you know that very famous literary story, Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty together again. Here's Isaiah and he's like Humpty, he's fallen off the wall. He's in the presence of God and he's come apart. That's what the language means. He has disintegrated. Relentless guilt screams at him from every fiber of his being. He has nowhere to hide, nothing to cover him. The Seraphim at least have something they can put in the way, he has nothing. He stands there condemned. One day, you know, that's going to be the fate of people when Jesus returns. Jesus says, "They will say to the mountains, Fall on us. And to the rocks and hills, Cover us." The book of Revelation describes that day when the sky will vanish like a scroll and every mountain and island will be removed from its place and the kings

of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone, everyone slave and free, hid themselves in caves and among the rocks on the mountains, calling on the mountains and the rocks, Fall on us and hide us. Hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand." That day is coming. That day is coming. This world is moving to that day. We need to be clear in saying that to the world, "Do you realize you are hurtling towards the wrath of the Lamb? Jesus Christ in his glory." The Jesus that Isaiah saw as John 12 tells us, "When he saw his glory that day in the temple." Isaiah saw in the temple the holy one, Christ.

Peter caught a glimpse of him even in his human nature, Peter saw Jesus perform a miracle and we read, "When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord." But actually, Isaiah was no Mr. Humpty. All the kings horses and all the kings men could not put him back together again. Isaiah didn't have horses and soldiers working for him but from the throne, "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.'" The holiness of God cries out to me, "Keep off. Draw back. No trespassing." And yet this vision of the holiness of God teaches me that God comes after me; he comes after me with mercy from the altar. Most likely this is the Day of Atonement, the only day of the year where the coals from the altar were taken into the Holy of Holies and the coal that had been in the altar is taken and is applied where he felt his sin most acutely, on his lips, the meeting point of the kiss, that most intimate part, as it were, touches there in a severe mercy, in a painful act of cleansing, being cleansed by holy fire from the altar and a second of burning flesh on the lips brought healing that lasted for eternity. The cleansing that God gave him didn't just deal with his speech, it dealt with all his sin and you notice it dealt with all his guilt, "Your guilt, all of it is taken away. Your sin, all of it has been paid for. Paid for on the altar. Paid for on the altar."

The God who is holy pushes us away because we are unholy is the same God who comes after us. He comes after us when that holy thing that is born, that is conceived in Mary's womb is born, and he walks among us as holy and blameless and perfect, as he dies on the cross, the holy one of God as he rises from the dead, that holy seat as he is exalted to his Father's right hand in the place of all power to sit on this throne and judge the nations. That Jesus. That Jesus in mercy, reaches out to us because his mercy is different too and cleanses us and makes us fit to stand, to exist in the presence of a holy God. Today all you and I can do is receive that gift of cleansing that comes from the throne above and is applied to each one of us individually by faith, receiving it, resting on it, trusting in the one who made it possible, our Lord Jesus, the holy one of God, the holy one of Israel.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you that in your mercy the experience of Isaiah so dramatic as it was, nonetheless is reproduced in the life of every believer who has come to see through your word their need and has come to cast themselves utterly on your mercy. Cleanse our

hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you, worthily praise you and eternally enjoy you. In Jesus strong name. Amen.