

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts

Call to Worship: Psalm 2

1st Scripture: Philippians 1:27-2:16

2nd Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-7

Introduction

One of the most often used, and yet, least understood terms (at least from a practical standpoint), which is used to describe our God, is the term “Holy.” If you were to put a poll out to the churches, asking all congregants to name the first word that comes to mind, when thinking about God, I am sure that “Holy” would be near, if not at, the top of the list of answers. Indeed, one of the most quoted portions of Scripture, which has been labeled, “The Lord’s Prayer,” begins with the expressed desire for God to “hallow” (or to sanctify, or to make holy) His Name, in all realms. And we call the Bible, “The Holy Bible,” don’t we, because we recognize that God’s Word is holy and in a class of its own, not to be equated with any other words written or spoken by anyone, anywhere, at anytime, among God’s creatures. And the fact that we find God described as holy (three times in a row) here in the Book of Isaiah, as that attribute alone which is so emphasized (In Hebrew, the Jews would use repetition to show emphasis, and a three-fold repetition would be of the utmost emphasis), implies that God’s holiness is something which is at the very root and base of all of His attributes. No other attribute of God is given this three-fold emphasis in all of Scripture. And so, we can rightly attach the word “holy,” as an adjectival description to all of God’s other attributes, such that we could say that God’s love is a *holy* love, His grace is a *holy* grace, His wrath is a *holy* wrath...etc. God’s holiness describes and defines the very quality and glory of all of His attributes. And yet, because God’s holiness is as infinite as His being, it can never be completely understood. That said, as the people of God, who are called to be holy, as God is holy, we ought to make it part of our lifelong ambition to unlock and grasp, greater depths of God’s holiness.

My preparatory study of Leviticus, and now, especially coming to Chapter 10, where God strikes down Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu for offering up strange/profane fire, has definitely deepened my very limited understanding of the holiness of God. For there, God was leaving a

mark; He was setting a precedent, right from the outset of the temple worship, to ensure that the people (and especially the priests) would regard God as holy. Indeed, the entire Book of Leviticus, for that matter, which provides us with the sobering way, in which, God had put a system in place, which would allow His sinful people to have limited access to Him, is a profound dissertation on the holiness of God! And when Aaron and his two other sons, having just been robed and consecrated for their priestly service, were forbidden from mourning the deaths of Nadab and Abihu (described as “the burning which the Lord has kindled”), it really struck me with a healthy terror; a healthy fear and trembling before the Lord. I was able to catch a glimpse of something so terrifying, and yet, proper and worthy of worship, in the character of God, as I contemplated that scene. It was like moving up one more notch in my grasp of the glory of God’s holiness, and while it shook me in the inside, I also found myself praising and thanking God for allowing me to grasp this reality about Him, at the same time. And as fearful as the sight was, it compelled me to want to grasp more of that glorious aspect of God’s character. It was wonderful and glorious, and yet, terrifying at the same time. And the words, “fear and trembling” came to mind, and the charge in Psalm 2, to “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling,” really started to hit me, in a profoundly, practical way. How does one rejoice and tremble at the same time? How does one revel in the grace and mercy of God, and yet, work out his salvation with fear and trembling, at the same time. Experientially, I have come to appreciate this in a profound way. And I hope, by the grace of God, to present this wondrous mystery; this Holy Spirit revealing paradox to you this morning.

If God is good and worthy of praise, then His terrifying holiness is good and praiseworthy, as well, brethren. That’s a fact, and we cannot be afraid to draw near, and to tremble and to quake before God, as we adore His loveliness and grace at the same time. These realities are, in fact, inseparable. And brethren, hear me out on this. Listen closely, because here is one of the greatest and most glorious treasures found in this mine of theology. If you want to appreciate and revel in the greatest depths of God’s incomprehensible love for you in Christ; if you want to span the incomprehensible dimensions of the love of Christ for you, then know this: You will only go as deep there, as you are willing to trek deeply into grasping the reality of God’s holiness. The way to a far deeper understanding of the love of God; the kind of

understanding that changes your life forever, is through the corridor of trembling before the holiness of God. That is not a very comfortable place to be, at times. We will see this in Isaiah. It was terrifying, in many ways. But...but, it will most certainly lead you to behold dimensions of God's love and grace that you could never have seen or grasped, if you avoided that corridor. God is holy! And you cannot understand the love of God, until you understand something about His holiness. You must visit Sinai, and you must visit the mountain where Peter, James and John, fell on their faces before the cloud of God's glory, if you are to feel the wondrous touch of Christ's hand upon your shoulder, as He lifts you up and says, "Be not afraid." Christ takes what is naturally most terrifying about God to sinners, and translates it, into the most vivid and wonderful picture of God's love, at the same time. Let's go there with Isaiah now.

I. Important Facts about Isaiah's Vision

As we begin our short journey this morning, brethren, consider some important facts about this vision which Isaiah receives:

1) He receives it just following the death of King Uzziah. And so, Jotham is presently reigning, and while Jotham was, overall, a good king, we are told in 2 Chronicles 27:2 that the people of the nation, in general, still acted corruptly. But, what is particularly interesting about this fact, is that Uzziah was the one king who, in his pride, foolishly decided to enter into the holy place of the temple, attempting to offer his own incense, until God had struck him with leprosy, which ended his reign, setting him aside in a secluded house where he would always be remembered as the "leper king." Indeed, it was the very holiness of God which led to the severe judgement upon King Uzziah, and everyone knew what had happened. This mighty, conquering king spent all of his remaining years in seclusion, because his pride led him to treat God as unholy. And now, just following his death, Isaiah receives this vision, which highlights the severity and glory of God's holiness, and that, within the context of a vision of the temple.

2) Unlike some of the other prophets (such as Daniel, Ezekiel & Zechariah), Isaiah's prophecies are generally *oral* in nature. In other words, you don't read of Isaiah seeing certain graphic images and pictures... except in this text. And so, it really stands out because of this, in the whole of Isaiah's large Book. It profoundly grabs your attention, when you read what he sees.

3) It is important to recognize that those who are repeatedly proclaiming and emphasizing the holiness of God are holy, created beings that are in the closest proximity to God's revealed presence and glory. These seraphim are always seen as close to God, as it were, and while God is everywhere present, it simply means that they behold aspects of God's glory that are profoundly greater and more emphasized than what most other created beings behold. Now, why do I mention this? Because, often times, we tend to limit the holiness of God to His righteous nature and His wrathfulness against sin. But here, we find sinless, glorious beings, who serve in some capacity as a billboard proclamation for the holiness of God, continually. And, in fact, their eyes are covered by one pair of their wings, because they cannot even look upon the radiance of God's glory, which is revealed to them. And so, God's holiness goes beyond His response to sin, having to do with the very uncreated and eternal essence of His nature. Yes, His holiness is what compels Him to condemn sin, but even if sin were not present, it would still radiate gloriously from the nature of His eternal being. Now, we also know this, because His grace is as equally compelled by His holiness as His righteous wrath is. Again, all of God's attributes and virtues spring out of His holiness.

4) Finally, Isaiah's response to the holy revelation of the nature of God, as manifested in the vision, provides us with another important fact, which will prepare us to grasp what is given to us in the text. Remember, this is not the beginning of Isaiah's ministry as a prophet. He has already been serving as a prophet of God, throughout the reign of King Uzziah, who has just died. And so, when he beholds the glory of God's holiness in this vision, it is as a faithful man of God that he responds the way that he responds in verse five. And how then does he respond to the glorious vision? Beholding the glory of God compels him to consider his own state, as he recognizes that there is no way that he can survive such a sight. He knows right away that the glory and majesty of what he is seeing are not meant for individuals who are infected with the corruption of sin. And he doesn't need to wrestle with theological concepts to come to this conclusion. What he sees compels him to realize this. And that is why he states, in a state of desperation and despair, "Woe is me, for I am undone!" "I am not worthy to behold what I see! The purity and glory of it is far too powerful for tainted eyes to behold. I am finished. I am a dead man!" You see, the closer one gets to God, the more aware they become of their own

personal unworthiness. Their sin and guilt and contamination are exposed. And what they perhaps thought wasn't that bad, suddenly becomes as dark and as wicked as the worst of sins, when they see themselves in the light of God's holiness and purity. Again, remember, Isaiah was a man of God! And notice as well, the first awareness of his profound corruption comes to a recollection of his speech. Something, we can so often think to be a small and insignificant matter... our words! Isaiah, the great prophet of God, who speaks God's holy truth, in these moments, recalls other words that have come from his lips, and he sees that they are completely contrary to the glory of what He beholds here! He sees his lips as unclean, as filthy, as having carelessly spewed things that were completely unworthy of what he has come to understand about his God. God's prophet is overwhelmed by his corrupt speech. What does that say for the rest of the nation. This is what this vision of the glory of God's holiness does to Isaiah!

II. A Brief Description of the Vision

Having considered a handful of important facts surrounding the vision, let us briefly consider a description of the vision itself.

In the vision, Isaiah is looking toward and inside the temple. And above the temple, he sees something similar to what Ezekiel sees, when he is called to the prophetic ministry in Ezekiel, Chapter 1. He sees the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, wearing glorious, kingly attire. And the royal robe that He is wearing has an extensive train which spills down from the throne and into the temple, such that the train itself fills the entire temple, which is also filled with smoke. And below the seated, exalted Lord (between the Lord and the temple), there are these glorious, six-winged creatures (seraphim), who bear His throne. With one pair of wings, they cover their feet, and another pair covers their eyes, which coincides with their repeated chants about the marvelous glory of God. And the last pair are used for flying.

And seeking to proclaim the glory of God, these seraphs chant loudly, back and forth, these words: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of glory; the whole earth is full of His glory!" Now, what's interesting about this declaration is the fact that God's glory, in this scene, is what is filling the temple. But, the seraphs here declare that the glory of God is actually displayed everywhere in creation! In other words, God's glory; the great power and majesty of God is

beheld in the creation itself, which is His glorious handiwork. What He has created, out of nothing, tells a story; a powerful and tremendous story, about the Creator and Designer Himself. And God has created in such a way that His glory would be revealed, would be seen, in some capacity through it. Now think about this for a moment. Can you imagine the utter insult to God, when creatures, made in His image (creatures, who stand out in this wonderful creation as image bearers of the One who created all things) so suppress the obvious truth about God in their sin, that they dare deny the very existence of God, in the face of such wonder and majesty?! The glory and reality of God is so blatantly plastered in a profound way, in everything that He has designed in this creation, from the microscopic, single-celled organism, to the span of the entire universe, where there are stars beyond our ability to number!

Now, as they make these repeated declarations, back and forth, their voices are so loud, thunderous and powerful, that each proclamation shakes the very posts and foundation of the large door that leads into the temple. And so, this is the vision which Isaiah receives on this rare and special occasion. And to this end, every one of his senses are meant to lay hold of a profound sense of the glory of God's holiness. The visual, royal and fiery imagery, the audible thunderous declarations and the felt quaking of the large temple door.

III. Isaiah's Response to the Vision

We've already touched upon Isaiah's response, but I want to add a few more observations here, which would go well with the lengthy introduction that I gave for this sermon.

The short form: Isaiah is devastated. What He experiences here, fills him with great fear and trembling, to the point that he is convinced that his life is about to end. He knows that his own sinful nature cannot possibly endure the presence of what he sees and hears and feels. And he knows that his people, sharing the same sin nature, could not stand in the presence of this God, as well. In many ways, you might say that prior to this, Isaiah's understanding of God was far too small. What he sees now, and keep in mind that this is only a vision (which itself assumes limitation, met to reach the understanding of a finite creature), but what he sees now, has brought him to a far greater appreciation for who exactly this God is. How does Isaiah sum up the reason for his undoing: "For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" He has

beheld the glory of the Lord in a powerful and profound way, and the holiness of the Lord has taken on a visual, audible and felt form before him, and it has utterly devastated him. It's as if he was suddenly somehow transported to the surface of the sun with no protection. He just appeared there. Immediately, he expects that his material body, organs and parts will just dissolve to nothing.

IV. How does Isaiah Survive?

How then does Isaiah survive such a display of the glory of God's holiness? [Read verses 6-7]. We are told that one of the seraphim, using tongs, plucked a live coal from the bronze altar, and then flew over to Isaiah. And then he touched Isaiah's mouth with the coal, purging his uncleanness from him. And so, the assumption is that Isaiah's sins are atoned for, by means of a sacrifice which God has accepted on his behalf, thereby enabling him to stand before God. The burning coal was taken from the altar of burnt offerings, where the priests had offered the daily atoning sacrifices on behalf of the people. Representing the judgment of God upon those sacrifices, it was used to sanctify the unclean lips of Isaiah, so that, he could continue to proclaim the holy Word of God, representing God before the people. And from here then, he is commissioned anew unto further ministry among the rebellious people of God.

V. The Purpose of the Vision

What then was the purpose of this vision? Why was Isaiah, who was already a prophet of God, brought through this experience of being deeply affected by the glory of God's holiness? Why was he, who was already a man of God, subject to such fear and trembling before the Lord? Simply put, it prepared him to serve God at a very difficult time, when fierce judgment was soon to come upon the people. Isaiah would have to proclaim a message that he knew would be rejected by the people (indeed, it would provoke the anger and hatred of the people toward him), and which would serve to increase the judgment upon the nation. And if he was to remain faithful to such a task, against so rebellious a people, he needed to behold something far more frightening and fierce, to motivate him, and to drive him forward, against all opposition. He needed to behold the glory of God's holiness! Listen to the message of the summation of

Isaiah's ministry going forward [Read vs. 8-13]. Not a very promising ministry for a prophet. But, when you have tasted of the glory of God and His holiness, you will enter any battlefield for the sake of His Name! To be sure, this terrifying experience was a blessing to Isaiah, not only as a means of preparing him for ministry, but to give him a further taste of the glory and beauty of God's holiness, which while fearful in many respects, is also something that provokes wonder, amazement and joyful worship, on the part of those who taste it. God's holiness is something to be adored, as well as feared. And thanks be unto God that an atonement enabled Isaiah to endure what would otherwise have destroyed him!

VI. Who did Isaiah see in the Vision?

Now brethren, as we work toward a conclusion, there are a few more important things that we must consider, beginning with answering the question, who did Isaiah see in the vision? While there are clear traces of the Triune God present in this vision, it is important to recognize that the Person who Isaiah actually sees on the throne, is the Lord Jesus Christ. We know this, because John tells us in John 12:41, after quoting from this very text (Isaiah 6:10), "These things Isaiah said when he saw [Jesus's] glory and spoke of Him!" And so, it is the glory of Jesus and His holiness, which is above and fills the temple, and which the seraphim are chanting about, which utterly devastates Isaiah! This isn't the glory of some Old Testament angry God, in contradistinction to the gracious Lord Jesus of the New Testament. This is the glory of Jesus Christ Himself, unchanging, and at all times!

And brethren, here is the sobering reality that should strike us, as we ponder this truth. This same Jesus, walks among the churches (He walks among the Lampstands), as we come before God in worship, as a gathered assembly! John saw this when he received the revelation on "The Lord's Day!" And if Jesus were to reveal to our senses, the reality of who He is, as He did with Isaiah; if He enabled us to see and to hear and to feel what our senses are presently dull to; if He were to rend the heavens and remove this ceiling right now, as it were, we would behold something akin to what Isaiah beheld. We would behold the train of His glorious robe, filling this church and the majesty of His radiant throne above! And we would hear the seraphim chanting over and over again about His glory! And we would be filled with fear and trembling!

And it would be a most glorious experience! And boy, would our worship take on a different form, wouldn't it?! And His cross would become ever so precious to us! We would gladly kiss the burning coal of His offering, wouldn't we! And our hearts would burst forth with loving praise and adoration!

VII. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts

Well, what then is the "holiness of God?" And how ought we to respond to His holiness? And how does a deeper understanding of His holiness actually drive us to grasp and revel in a deeper understanding of His holy love? Well, let's conclude by addressing each of these questions.

1) What is the "holiness of God?" Well, we can start out by saying that the word "holy," when referencing God, is a term that God has chosen to use as a means of expressing something about Himself which really is beyond comprehension. In other words, I don't believe that anyone could ever grasp the fullness of what the term represents, without being God Himself. We get glimpses of the reality by beholding God's actions and doings in His creation. It comes out in tangible ways there. We get pieces of a large (infinitely large) puzzle. We get tastes of a vast, infinite ocean of the truth that is exhibited by, and is God. But, we can never come to grips with the whole of the substance that lies behind the term. And it is for this reason that we will always and ever be learning about God, even in heaven, forever! This might not seem very helpful, for the moment, but it is important to recognize, nonetheless. God's holiness is as infinite as He is. It deals with the very essence of His infinite being. It is what defines the reality of God's character, and out of which, every one of His attributes spring, if we can say that in some limited and sanctified sense. It is not some material that makes up God; nor is it simply some invisible, non-living substance which consists of God. But it is what defines the very uniqueness of God for us.

Now, getting more specific, we can say this. God's holiness is what defines His distinctness and uniqueness as God. It's what separates Him from anything and everything that He has ever, or will ever create. It is the summary exposition of everything that is God, and which makes its way out in very tangible ways, when He relates to anything and everything that

He has created. Now, we get a small picture of this when God commands His people to be holy because He is holy, don't we? What is God commanding us to do, when He gives us this command? He is telling us to stand out; to come out and be separate from everything that is naturally offensive to Him, and to relate to everyone in a way that is in keeping with His character, so that, others can grasp the reality of who God truly is. We are to bear His image, and within our finite context, we do so, by adhering to His Law (His righteous standard), while exhibiting those God-like virtues which reflect God, to a creation that is fallen, ungodly and unholy. Indeed, what is it to be *unholy*? It is to live in a way which is contrary to the character, design and will of God; with His design and will proceeding out of His character. It is to live in violation of His unique and glorious Being. And so, we get glimpses of the reality of God's character and Being, by tracking the signals that He leaves for us through His revealed will and His Word. And brethren, beholding the reality of God's holiness brings trembling, but it brings a healthy and even joyful trembling to those who have been touched by the burning ember of Christ's sacrifice!

And here is where we answer those final two questions. How ought the holiness of God to affect us, and how does it drive us to a deeper understanding of the love of God? It affects us by compelling us to display His holiness in all of our living, in all of our speech, and in short, in all that we do. It compels us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, recognizing that it is God who is at work in us, to will and to do, according to His good pleasure! The living, eternal and unique God is close to us, and at work in us; God of very God; is actively and intimately involved in our lives, forming us into what is most beautiful and glorious, namely, the image of His holy Son! And that should bring trembling/shaking to our souls, brethren! And that should drive us to work out our salvation; to fight the good fight; to run full steam ahead for the prize, even recognizing at the same time, that we run for a prize that is only possible to obtain, if God completes what He has begun in us. He is at work in us, and we fight with every fiber of our beings, confident that we will prevail, because God is faithful!

And how does the holiness of God bring us to grasp greater depths of His love for us? Because as we behold Him for who He is, we inevitably see who we are. We become more and more honest with ourselves, and undone in ourselves, which drives us to see that only that which

God provides in Christ, completely and in total, is that which brings us into the presence of such a glorious Being! We can behold what is altogether lovely; we can behold what is altogether holy and most desirable, because it is the very love of God that grants us full access to Him. We recognize that our union with Christ alone, is that which brings us into the presence of that which our interests and desires and minds and hearts long to behold, but could never do so, otherwise... the living God! The coal of Christ's offering; the fiery token of His true and perfect love; indeed, the greatest expression and definition of love itself, is what brings us there! Indeed, God's holiness is the very gateway to laying hold of His love!

His holiness will bring trembling; it will sap you of all of your energy like Daniel, who couldn't get up when receiving the vision; it will bring you to see yourself as undone with Isaiah, but it will not leave you there! It will carry you right into the arms of His redemptive love, like never before! And brethren, hear this final statement from me. If we could grasp but a fraction of what Isaiah saw; a fraction even; like Isaiah, we (every last one of us) would forget all else (COVID, presidential elections, world affairs, all worries, indeed, all of the busyness of life), and we would plead with God, "Here I am, Lord! Send me! Send me!" Yes, we would be a church full of missionaries!

Amen!!!

Benediction: Ephesians 3:14-21