

Houses of the Holy!

The Gospel According to Isaiah

By Dr. Liam Goligher

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Bible Text: Isaiah 6

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Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Please take your Bibles and turn Isaiah 6. A casual observer of public conversations as well as church conversations might come away with different views as to who was meant when the word "God" was used. God is often described or thought of as an aloof concept, a Deist ideal, personal convenience or sentimental crutch, an occasional interventionist or a benign friend. In general conversation, the word "God" very seldom includes ideas of exclusivity, of discomfort or of demand. Many years ago a man called P. T. Forsyth wrote a book in which he said that the most dangerous thing for the future of religion was the slow shallowing of the religious mind. David Wells picks up that theme when he famously wrote about the weightlessness of God, a God who sits inconsequentially on the minds and hearts and lives of men and women. Forsyth said that partly this is due to the lazy cry for simplicity. We want to simplify, dumb down, make accessible what we mean by "God" so that people will find it acceptable or understandable or comprehensible. He goes on to say that what is necessary, in fact, is this: that our safety ultimately in dealing with God is not in what we grasp or what is accessible or even knowable and comprehensible about him, our safety is in the deep. Mostly people settle for superficial and surface rather than mind-stretching, gut-wrenching reality of who God is. The character of God, the revealed will of God, don't move us or stir us or scare us or offend us or thrill us. We look elsewhere for our thrills. We look elsewhere for our entertainment. We look to artistry and aesthetics to win our hearts or woe us or wow us rather than the reality of who God is. We are far more likely to be moved by Mozart or mood music than we are by the living God himself.

The Judah in which Isaiah lived was more or less in the same place as general religion is today. Against the background of an ever increasing lightening of the idea of God, into that background comes this vision to Isaiah. You notice how he starts, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord." He's not saying that he saw God as he is in himself. Way back in Moses' time, Moses who had been an eyewitness of the astounding miracles of God, who had heard the voice of God from the mountain and from the burning Bush, who tasted manna in the wilderness, who had seen the chariots of Pharaoh overwhelmed and destroyed in the Red Sea, wanted one more thing, he wanted the ultimate spiritual experience and he comes to God and he says, "Let me see your face. Show me your glory," and his request is denied. The Lord God said to him, Exodus 33, "I will cause all my goodness to pass before you and I will proclaim my name, Yahweh, the Lord in your

presence and I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion but you cannot see my face. No one may see me and live." You'll remember how God hid Moses in the rock and said, "I'm going to bring my glory and I'm going to cause my glory to pass by while I hide you in the rock and after I've passed by, I'll let you out to see the afterburner of my glory that has passed by." And when Moses comes down out of the mountain, his face is radiant. It has to be veiled. People are terrified, they are terrified by the reflection on the face of Moses, of the afterburner of the glory that is merely the manifestation of the Lord who passed by. Can you imagine this? Just the afterburner reflected on the face of Moses terrifies the people because God, God who is real, God in himself, moves, stirs, terrifies, changes and Isaiah has a vision of God, "I saw the Lord."

No man can see God and live and yet the hope of every Jew is just to do that very thing. The Aaronic blessing, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." The blessing longed for by every Jew is to see the face of God. And the destiny of every believer be they Jew or Gentile is that that is, in fact, what will happen. When he shall appear we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. The Apostle John describes this beatific vision when we see God in the face of Jesus Christ and Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

Now Isaiah did not see God as we are going to do. He didn't see God as Moses longed to do but he sees a vision of God that God reveals to him and it's packed full of theological teaching and significance. What did he see? He tells us: first of all, he saw the sovereign Lord. He saw the sovereign Lord. It's the year 739 BC. It is the the year King Uzziah died. It's a time of crisis nationally. Uzziah had been a great king, very popular. Judah had not known such wonderful days since the time of Solomon. Uzziah had become king at the age of 16. He was to reign for 52 years. He was an able administrator. He was a military leader. He dug cisterns in the desert and caused irrigation so that agriculture took off as an industry there in Judah. He had experts come and set up new machinery of warfare that meant that Jerusalem was the most protected of any city in the region. You never had it so good as during the time of Uzziah. Most of his public life, he was faithful and believing through the influences of a prophet called Zechariah. "He did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord." And only at the very end of his life does anything change in his personal experience and personal behavior. There comes a point where Uzziah has been so successful that he's become arrogant, he's become proud. He oversteps the boundaries of good behavior. He goes into the house of God and he offers a sacrifice; he does the job of a priest. That's not the king's job and the high priest comes to him and says to him, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord. That's for the priests to do." And he oversteps the boundaries and because he oversteps the boundaries, leprosy comes upon him as a judgment from God and the last years of his life are spent isolated, away from the center of power in his son Jotham reigns as regent.

Yet, the reality is as long as Uzziah lived, nobody was going to attack Judah. As long as Uzziah lived, there was pause given to his enemies and there was confidence instilled in the hearts and minds of his people because Uzziah's very existence, his presence, the fact

that he was there, made the people of Judah and Jerusalem feel as if they were somebody. They felt strong. They felt confident. They felt at peace. They felt they could do anything. They could hold their heads up high as long as Uzziah was there, there was confidence in them as a nation and as a people.

And it was the year that King Uzziah died that Isaiah says he saw the Lord. Who did he see? Who did he see? If you look at verse 5 you'll see that he saw, Yahweh, he saw the Lord. In verse 5 you notice the word for Lord is in all uppercase letters. That translates Yahweh, that's God's personal name. My personal name is Liam. It's a contraction of William. My mother didn't like William; there were too many Bills and Billy's and Willy's in our family that she thought that Liam was something you couldn't do anything with. She always said there was nothing you could do with Liam and apparently that was the case and she called me Liam and that's the name that people know me by. When I was growing up in school, they called me William at school and Liam at home. It's my personal name. Of course nowadays, people have other things they call me that aren't quite so nice and there are other titles. Some people are very gracious and they call me Pastor or Dr. and then there are the other things that you've maybe heard that people say and they are not true honestly.

But the personal name of God is this name Yahweh, this is his own personal name. It's the covenant name of God. My eyes have seen the King, the Lord, Yahweh, of hosts. But in verse 1, it's another word for Lord. Do you notice that it's translated L and then lowercase o-r-d? It translates the word Adonai. Adonai is a title. It is not a personal name. It means the sovereign one. It means king. It means Lord in that sense, the immortal King. There is a contrast between the King Uzziah and the Lord, between this unclean and mortal king, Uzziah, and this holy and immortal King, the Lord, Adonai. The King eternal, immortal, invisible. The contrast between the limitlessness of Yahweh's reign and the limitations of the reign of an earthly king. Adonai is translated into the Greek language, Kurios, it's the name used of the Lord Jesus over and over again. He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. In fact, in John's Gospel in chapter 12, we discover who it was that Isaiah saw. Who is this Adonai? Who is this Lord? Who is this Yahweh of hosts. God in all his fullness but in John's Gospel chapter 12, we are told Isaiah saw Jesus' glory. Jesus' glory. Jehovah Jesus. Yahweh Yeshua. He saw the Lord Jesus in all his reigning splendor there in the temple in the year King Uzziah died.

What do we mean by Lordship? Back in 1990, I came to Philadelphia, attended church here on a Sunday morning and on this particular Sunday, the first Sunday of the year, I came to hear Dr. Bice but he wasn't preaching that Sunday and that was the only time I was ever here and wanted to hear him. I was at Westminster and I was sitting in classes by John Frame. John Frame's view of Lordship is that there are three aspects to the Lordship of God: control and authority and presence. As the Lord, he has control. He has control of the forces of nature and the forces of Assyria and Babylonia and Rome and Greece and all these other powers. As the Lord, he controls the flows of rivers and the flow of history. He controls the flow of nations and the fate of individuals. He controls everything for his own glory and to accomplish his own purpose.

Not only has he control, but he has authority. He has authority. What is the relationship between control and authority? John Frame says it's the relationship between might and right. Not only does he have the control and therefore is able to do whatever he pleases in the universe that he has made, but he has the right to do so. He has authority; he is its Creator, he is its owner; he is its Lord; he is its King. He has the absolute authority to describe who he is. He has the authority to make demands of his creatures. He has the authority to insist that we trust and obey him. He has authority. Jesus has control and authority. Even the wind and the waves obey him and when he speaks he says, "Why do you say to me, Lord, Lord, Adonai, Adonai, and do not do what I say?" He has the authority to expect us to obey him. When Jesus speaks, he speaks with authority not like the scribes. When he speaks, he revises the opinions of the scholars; he expels the demons from people's lives; he heals their diseases; he forgives their sins; he raises their dead. Jesus has authority. He is Lord.

The third aspect of Lordship is the presence of God, that he is present everywhere and all the time. Isaiah learned it there in the temple that day. The lid is taken off the temple roof, as it were, the back wall of the temple is taken away and there is, if you like, an inverted pyramid as from that little point of real estate, all of eternity begins to fan out. He begins to see the enormity and the greatness and the power and the majesty of God. He sees that God, starting there from his footstool, there at the back of the tabernacle where the Ark of the Covenant was, now the screen has gone, now he sees that he can't even see the footstool of God because he cannot see the feet of God. God's enormity, God's greatness, God's majesty comes before his vision, "I saw the Lord." He finds that God's glory is everywhere. It's all over the earth. Notice in verse 5, the whole earth is full of his glory. He is everywhere. He is everywhere to judge and purify. He is everywhere to rule and command. He is, in the end, the God who is there. He is just simply there. He is the God you cannot escape; no matter where you go in the world, you cannot escape him because he's there. Even in your darkest moments, even in your most isolated moments, he is the God who is simply there. You cannot get away from him. If you were to go to the very furthest and remotest part of the universe, you would discover that God is simply there. He is the God who is there and with whom you have to do and you cannot avoid him or escape him. He is always there. He is the God who is present everywhere.

This insight into God's presence here, the Lord present in the temple, this insight is preparing us for a revelation that is coming in Isaiah because just in a few chapters, he's going to tell us that the King will come as a child born, the King with divine titles will come into the world and when he comes he will be Immanuel which means "God with us," God who is now here. He is here. He is with us in this world. This is the Lord that Isaiah met in the temple. Not only because it was the end of one regime and the beginning of another, it was the turning point in Israel's history. From now on it's all going to be downhill towards exile, banishment and loss and the exile continues to this day. Exclusion from the temple of God. And at that point in history, as well as this moment in his life, he sees the King. The King is dead. The King still reigns and he will go on reigning through the rise of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. He will be reigning when Alexander the great weeps because there are no more worlds to conquer. He will be

there when Julius Caesar is murdered by Brutus. He will be there when Charles Darwin writes his 'Origin of Species' and tries to dismiss the Creator from his creation. He will be there when this old world has come to an end and when the human story has the final clause of its story written. He will be there because he is the living God. He is the living God. He is the sovereign God. He is the God who is there. He saw the sovereign Lord.

He saw secondly, the exalted Lord. There are a whole series of expressions that you'll find in Scripture that stress the excessiveness, the largeness, the boundlessness of God. A God who defies human imagination, who exceeds human comprehension, who transcends human limitation. This God whom Isaiah saw, do you notice, he is not us. He is not us. He's not one of us. He's not a mate that you can pat on the back. He's not one of us. He is the final authority. He is in complete control. He is everywhere present. The Psalmist says that God dwells on high, that his greatness is unsearchable. Isaiah says he is high and lifted up and he will go on to show us in this book how God so easily, effortlessly exercises total control and sovereignty over all of his creation. He sees this exalted Lord, you notice, sitting on a throne. The prophet is in the temple and the veil is removed and there where the Ark of the Covenant should be, he sees as he looks upward beyond it, the throne of God. The word for "temple," of course, is a loan word from the surrounding nations and it means a palace. This temple is the palace of the King that is not Uzziah and not Ahaz or Jotham or any of the other earthly kings. This is the palace of the King. The King of kings.

On the throne. The throne of judgment, the throne where he rules from. He is high and exalted. This towering throne is massive. It's going to become one of the themes of this book. Only God is high and exalted. Only God is high and exalted. Whenever puny little people tried to exalt themselves and make themselves important and make themselves high, they learn as they come crashing into contact with this living God how foolish that is. Only God is high. Only God is exalted. This vision of God will once and for all shatter any illusions Isaiah may have that there are other people in the world that are so impressive that they scare the living daylights out of you and their very presence makes you feel inadequate. This will shatter that altogether because when you see God as big, people become small. When God is great in your eyes, it puts everything else in the world into perspective. Everything else in the world into perspective. I ask you, "Is God big for you? Is he great for you? Is he large? Is he enormous for you? Is God greater than any human being in whom you have put your confidence and trust?"

This God who is great, high and it exalted, what is he like? Tell us what he's like. You know exactly what happens. Imagine this scenario: you've got teenage children and they come home one day and this son of yours, he comes in and he says, "I've met the most wonderful and beautiful girl in the world." And you say to him, "Well, tell us about her? What is she like?" "Well, you should see her Jimmy Choo shoes." Aren't you impressed that I even know about Jimmy Choo shoes? "You should see her shoes. Let me tell you about her shoes." I mean, can you imagine what a ridiculous thing that would be? Can you imagine that? Let me tell you about people who have an encounter with God, back in Exodus 24, there is a revelation of God and those who see him, this is what they talk about, those who see them this is what they report, this is what they tell you when they

see the Lord, listen, "Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself." What? We don't want to know about the pavement, we want to know what the Lord looks like. You come to Isaiah here and you say to Isaiah, "So you saw the Lord, tell us about him." "Well, the hem of his robe filled the temple." We don't want to know about the hem of his robe. We're not interested in his clothes or his hems or whatever, we want to know what does the Lord look like? And whenever people meet the Lord, that's all they can tell you, the pavement and the hem. The Jimmy Choo shoes. Because, you see, when you've seen God, there is no language you can use to describe him, there are no categories that are familiar into which you can see him. He is beyond all of that. Can you imagine, here Isaiah talks about the hem of his robe. It envelops the whole temple. That's literally the word, by the way, it's the hem of his robe and it envelops the whole temple. In fact, nobody else can get in there. I mean, I've been to some weddings where the bride has had a long train, has been quite effulgent and so on and very big but usually there's room for the rest of us to get in to the church. But here the very hem of God's robe fills the temple and there's no place for Isaiah. He's left outside, as it were, looking in. He can't get near. And if the hem of his robe is filling the temple, how great is that robe? How great is that throne? How great is that being? How big is God? How big is God? Do you see? For the whole earth is filled with his glory. Everything is in the grip of this God. Isaiah in that temple on that day saw the intersection between the heavenly throne of God and his earthly house. He saw God exalted.

That's not all, thirdly, he saw the glorious Lord. The sovereign Lord, the exalted Lord, the glorious Lord. You can see that in verse 5, the whole earth is full of his glory. This word "glory" simply means the outward manifestation, anything you can see, anything you can see of the invisible God is his glory. God himself, you can't see, he's invisible so any manifestation of what he is doing, what he has done..very often it's described as splendor or bright light and so on. There's a whole variety of things but any manifestation of God whether it's that cloud of fire that led the children of Israel through the desert is a manifestation of the glory of God.

So the prophet lies prostrate at the door of the temple before this immense being whose presence dominates and pervades the sanctuary and as he's contemplating the hem of the robe which is all he can apparently keep his eyes on because he dared not look at God, he's conscious of movement out of the corner of his eye and as he looks up he sees that there of these other beings, these other creatures, these shining, fiery, burning creatures, Seraphim. There are servants standing while God is seated, ready to serve him. Now, we know about other creatures: we know about the cherubim, we read about them in Ezekiel 1 and in Revelation 4. We read about them earlier on today. These cherubim, they are different from the Seraphim. They have a different function. These Seraphim or angelic beings, also they are personal and spiritual; they have faces and feet and hands and they employ human speech and they understand moral concepts. That's all we really have to work on. They are the burning ones, the shining ones. We don't know how much of what Isaiah's description here is reality or metaphor or symbol but he tells us something fundamental about them, he tells us more about the Seraphim than he tells us about God. Do you notice that he tells us that they have six wings. They cover their eyes, in other words, they are marked by reverence. They dare not look; they dare not look on God.

There are mysteries to God which God keeps to himself and which no creature, not even those who are at the top of the pole, the Seraphim, not even they get to see. They don't get to see him it. They are excluded. God has made enough of himself known to us that we know him truly but he has not made everything of himself known to us. What we can see is in harmony with what we cannot see but he has kept a lot back. The revealed things belong to us, the rest belongs to him.

They cover their eyes. They cover their feet. These are not the kind of celestial equivalent of a pair of trainers or whatever, this is a mark of their humility. They are conscious of their creatureliness. Do you remember the burning bush? Moses is told, "Take off those shoes from off your feet." Actually, there was a movie made about Moses and the burning bush, the Ten Commandments, that's where I discovered that God was American. I hadn't known that until that movie came out, the one with Charlton Heston. Seriously, "Take off your shoes from off your feet for the ground on which..." He definitely had an American accent. It's not like that. Sorry, seriously. But you remember God told Moses to take the shoes off his feet. Why? Because as he stood in the dirt in front of that burning bush, he was being reminded that it was from the dirt he was made. "You are dust. You are a creature and you're in the presence of the Creator." It was a solemn moment. We sometimes talk about our heroes and we say about them that they have feet of clay. What are we saying? We're saying, well, they are mortal and they are sinful. These Seraphim are spirit beings but they're creatures and in the presence of God and you see in the presence of God they want to hide themselves. They don't want to be too obtrusive. They don't want to be noticed. They want to disappear so that only God can be seen.

Not only that, but they are ready to fly. Not only are they reverent and humble in the presence of God but they are ready to serve. It is their delight to move instantly to do his bidding. Somebody once said that Seraphs typify the appropriate response to God: they're all wings and all voice; ready to give praise, ready to do service. And they are constantly singing one to another chanting, as it were, to each other these words in verse 5, "Holy, holy, holy."

We're not looking at this verse this morning but that really is the heart of Isaiah 6 and we'll have to come back next week for another show, to see it again. What we're going to focus on this morning is simply the throne. This is the King, the Lord of hosts. The King. "My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts," Isaiah says down there in verse 5. The King. This was the vision that Isaiah received. Here he is living in a world in which sinful Israel and then proud Assyria will have their own agendas and will do their own thing. Here is the King. The King has his agenda. The King has his purpose and his plan and his plan is going to take up the rest of human history and then eternity. Isaiah is going to describe that to us in the episodes to follow.

Here he is living in a time when the hopes of his fellow countrymen and his own hopes have been shattered. Somebody they respected and admired from a distance, the king, who was a mark of stability in the nation, he has been humbled and now will die. And in the year he died, Isaiah says, "I saw the King." Some of you have people significant in your life that you've lost in the last year. Perhaps some of you will have people who are

significant in your life lost to you this year and right in the beginning of this year, let me say to all of us, we need to keep our eyes on the King. The Psalmist often say this, "Don't put your trust in mortal men, in princes. No matter how influential they are. No matter how significant they may be. No matter how you feel as if the whole world is built on who they are and what they do. Don't put your trust in princes, in mortal men who come and strut and fret their hour upon the stage and leave." God is the King. God is the King.

In our world, increasingly we're seeing the persecution of Christian people. That may intensify this year and in the years to come. It may be harder for us even to live for God here in the United States than it's ever been before. But let me remind you that in the year that King Uzziah died, at a turning point in which now Assyria, this power that was growing, bubbling away in the background, is going to become insistently and increasingly strong and overwhelming to little Israel and Judah, Isaiah saw the King. I want you to see him. We used to sing a song at the end of our Sunday evening services when I was growing up,

“So be it, Lord; Your throne shall never,
Like earth’s proud empires, pass away:
Your kingdom stands, and grows forever,
Till all Your creatures own Your sway.”

Let's pray together.

Father, we pray that you would please help us to see that you are so great, so big, so exclusive, extensive, so effective, so immense and infinite, that you are the King, that you reign supreme, that every other influence and individual and power and authority is nothing, will come and go but you remain and you are the King on our behalf. You are our King. You control and have authority and are present for the sake of your people in the world, that you're on the throne of judgment, that is, you judge the world and you judge your own people by your purposes. You are the King. You're on the throne. You're high and exalted. We thank you that you have highly exalted your Son the Lord Jesus whom you raised from the dead and he sits in your glory at your right hand. We thank you that Isaiah saw Jesus' glory. We thank you that he saw Jesus in his nature as God, as it were, manifesting God. No man has seen God but the only God who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. We pray that today by faith we grasp all of his, the Lord Jesus, and rest in him. We pray in his strong name. Amen.