

Holy is the Lord: Isaiah 6:1-7

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Ever since I decided to preach the book of Isaiah, I've been anticipating chapter 6, the passage we come to this morning. This is one of those mountain top experiences in Scripture. It is one of those passages that demands our attention in a unique way. It's one of those passages that inspires within us a unique sense of awe and wonder.

Early in the week as I was reading over this passage I thought to myself, "I love the Word of God!" Does that thought ever strike you as you're reading the Bible? I'm not saying that every moment that I'm reading the Bible I'm feeling that, or that my attention is always riveted on the truth of God's Word. My mind wanders. My affections wander.

But I do recognize this, and I'm so grateful to God for this gift, that He has changed me in such a profound way that when I look into His Word I get excited about knowing Him better. I get inspired to learn more and experience more of my Savior. This is an awesome Book! It doesn't get old. There are more and more and more riches to dig for, to benefit from. There are more nuggets of truth, more insights to glean.

When I come to a passage like Isaiah 6, it's like my jaw drops to the floor. I feel like I'm at a loss of what to say. And in that way, it's an intimidating passage to preach. What can I possibly say to help us see what Isaiah saw, to experience what he experienced, to feel what he felt, and to respond like he did? I don't think there's anything I can say to make that happen, at least not in my own strength or by my own wisdom.

And that's precisely what moves me past the intimidation factor of this passage to a sense of tremendous excitement about preaching this passage. Because I'm praying and hoping and trusting that God is going to accomplish what I cannot accomplish. I'm trusting that the things God allowed Isaiah to see, and the record that we have here of Isaiah's vision, . . . I'm trusting that God is going to use this in our midst this morning to give us a vision of His holiness.

So whatever you came here today expecting, I want you to raise your expectations. I want us all to have very high expectations of what God is going to do inside of us through the study of this passage. I want each of you to pay very close

attention to what this passage reveals about God and about us. And I want you each to be sensitive to what God is showing you, personally, in these verses.

We're only going to cover half the chapter this morning. The second half of the chapter records the Lord's commissioning of Isaiah, and we'll come back to that. But we're just going to look today at the first 7 verses which record this vision in which Isaiah beholds the holiness of the Lord.

So far in our study of Isaiah we've looked at portions of chapters 1-5. We've learned about Isaiah's ministry to the southern kingdom of Judah. That was the context of his ministry which lasted over 40 years, during the time of 4 different kings, from about 740 B.C. to 700 B.C. Verse 1 of our passage for this morning helps us with placing this on the timeline. This vision took place in the year that King Uzziah died (around 740 B.C.).

But that statement communicates more than just where we're at on the timeline. It communicates something of the political and economic and emotional context as well. King Uzziah was a great king in many respects, and Judah flourished under his leadership. They had experienced a few decades of prosperity and safety during his reign. It might have been easy for some to think that as long as King Uzziah is on the throne, everything is going to be fine.

It's an interesting thing for us to consider as Americans as we're in the midst of what seems like a never-ending campaign season. I've lost count of how many debates there have been already. And I'm not sure the latest count on how many candidates there still are. But I do know there are a lot of people out there who are saying, "Put your hope in me and my ideas and my plans for this nation. Because if I'm in charge, everything will be better."

It brings to mind Psalm 20:7, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." Don't get me wrong here. I think we should pay attention to what's happening politically. I think we should be informed voters. But at the end of the day we have to ask ourselves, What am I trusting in, ultimately. Because some trust in military might or the president's initiatives or the stock market, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

That seems to be part of God's point in the timing of Isaiah's vision. In case anyone was trusting in King Uzziah . . . in case anyone is fretting now because Uzziah is dead, let it be known

who is the great and mighty One who is on the throne, not just of Judah, but of the universe.

Well, let's look at verses 1-7 now in 3 parts. Let's first look at the holiness of the Lord. Then we'll look at Isaiah's response, which should also be our response. And then, finally, we'll see the Lord's provision.

The Lord's Holiness

Do you remember a couple weeks ago we were looking at Isaiah chapters 2 and 5? The title of the sermon that week was "The Lord Exalted, the People Humbled." Well, those themes continue to be very significant in chapter 6.

Isaiah 2:11 says, "The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day." Verse 17 is very similar. And then 5:15-16 say it again, "Man is humbled, and each one is brought low, and the eyes of the haughty are brought low. But the Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness."

And now, in chapter 6, in this vision of the Lord's holiness, Isaiah sees the Lord sitting upon a throne. This helps to describe God's holiness. He is on a throne. He is high and lifted up. He is separate from us. He is transcendent. He is other. He is on a different plane (on a different level) than us.

The setting of this vision is in the temple. And there are some striking features to what Isaiah experienced with various senses. He saw the train of the Lord's robe filling the temple. He smelled the smoke that filled the place (verse 5 mentions the smoke). And he also heard and felt the thundering voices of the seraphim. Verse 4 says the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called. This was a multi-sensory experience for Isaiah.

I'm sure it burned an impression on his soul that he never forgot. And what did that experience impress upon him? It showed him the holiness of the Lord.

God's holiness is somewhat difficult to define. **Wayne Grudem** attempts a definition, saying that "**God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.**" So it's closely related to His attributes of sinlessness and perfection, righteousness and glory. These are hard to describe precisely with words.

And that's why the vision of Isaiah 6 is so helpful. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. An experience can communicate more than hundreds of pages of description. What Isaiah saw and heard and felt was the blazing holiness of Almighty God.

There are other places in Scripture where God appears in a similar way, showing His holiness and power and glory. For instance, when God was about to give Moses the Ten Commandments, Exodus 19 says that **“Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly”** (verse 18). And it says that the Lord **“answered [Moses] in thunder”** (verse 19). Ezekiel, also, in his visions of God, records this: **“As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal” (Ezekiel 1:4)**. These would have been intense and unforgettable experiences. We also think of how God spoke to Job out of the whirlwind.

Our God is an awesome God, a holy God, a transcendent God, and He demands our attention and our reverence. It is also true that God is imminent. He is close to us and loves us and sympathizes with us and is gentle and kind. And the spectrum of His attributes is a wonderful thing. But let's make sure we don't think of Him only as a gentle, imminent, sympathetic God. For He speaks, and the mountains shake. May we never forget that the God who is revealed in Scripture, the God whom we approach in prayer, the God whom we worship in these corporate gatherings, is the God who speaks out of the whirlwind, the God who sits high up on the throne of the universe. My hope is that children growing up in this congregation will have it ingrained in them that God is important. The things of God are weighty. Our God is a big God.

Now, what about these seraphim? This word is plural. The “im” ending in the Hebrew indicates the plural. So you would speak of one seraph, 2 or more seraphim. The same with the word cherub. One cherub, 2 or more cherubim. As we sang earlier in the song, “Holy, holy, holy,” . . . we sang about “cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee.”

There are a few descriptions of these kinds of heavenly beings in Scripture. There were the 2 cherubim on top of the ark of the covenant as part of the mercy seat. They were made of gold and had wings that covered the mercy seat and their faces were bowed down toward the mercy seat (Exodus 25:17-22). In Ezekiel's visions he describes 4 living creatures. He also mentions

cherubim. And then we have in the book of Revelation, the apostle John's heavenly visions. There are several similarities between Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4. In Revelation 4 John describes a throne with one seated on the throne. And then 24 other thrones with 24 elders, flashes of lighting, rumbling and peals of thunder, burning torches of fire. And he describes 4 living creatures, each with 6 wings, who day and night never cease to say, **“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”** And the 24 elders join in the worship by falling down before the One on the throne, and they say, **“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”**

What glorious visions these are of what happens around the heavenly throne, where the Lord is worshipped, and will be worshipped, forever and ever.

Coming back to Isaiah 6 and the description of these seraphim, this word “seraphim” is only used in 2 verses in the entire Bible. And both of those verses are part of our passage this morning. Verse 2 and verse 6. These are the only places where this term shows up in all of Scripture. The Hebrew word means “burning” or “flames.” It seems that these were fiery creatures in some way. This is how Isaiah described them. We don't know how many there were. But we know that each of them had 6 wings. With 2 they covered their face and with 2 they covered their feet. Even as heavenly beings, they demonstrated this humility and unworthiness as they flew around in the presence of the Lord. The other thing we know about them is that they had thunderous voices. As they called out to one another, the foundations of the thresholds shook.

And this is their ongoing activity. Calling out to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” In their words of praise we see the close connection between God's holiness and His glory. In light of how the term “glory” is used here, I think we're meant to understand it as the outward display of His greatness and holiness. One commentator, **Alec Motyer**, put it this way, **“Holiness is God's hidden glory; glory is God's all-present holiness.”**¹ God is holy. And He's making His holiness known throughout the earth. It's a present reality as well as a future hope, as we talked about a couple weeks ago in relation to the day of the Lord. There is a day coming when God's glory will be shown and acknowledged more widely and more clearly than it is now. Isaiah 11:9 speaks of that

¹*The Prophecy of Isaiah*, J. Alec Motyer, page 77.

time when “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” We see God’s glory going forth now, but we also long for that time when His glory will fill the earth like the waters cover the sea.

The seraphim declare, not just once, not twice, but three times, the holiness of the Lord. This is a way of saying He’s really holy. He’s absolutely holy. He’s completely holy. We’re at a loss to fully admire His holiness or to describe it sufficiently. So we’ll just say it over and over and over again. And then we’ll say it over and over and over again. And then again and again and again. These fiery, angelic beings, with their voices like thunder, flying around the throne room of the Lord Almighty, proclaiming back and forth to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.”

Our Response

How does Isaiah respond to this intense experience? What is his reaction as he beholds this glorious scene? And what should our response be as we behold the holiness of the Lord?

Look at verse 5. “Woe is me! For I am lost (or ruined); for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

This is what a vision of the Lord’s holiness does. It highlights our lack of holiness. One illustration that comes to mind is washing dishes. If I were to wash dishes in very dim lighting, I would probably get done quicker. But the dishes wouldn’t be clean. The brighter the lighting, the more clearly I can see the spots that still need to be scrubbed.

It’s like that with our spiritual condition. If there’s not much light, or no light at all, it’s easy to think, “I’m pretty clean. I’m pretty good. I don’t see any spots or blemishes. No defects here.” But when the blazing spotlight of God’s holiness pierces through that darkness, it reveals every ugly stain and sin.

That’s what Isaiah was experiencing, and it’s obviously a very uncomfortable ordeal. But one must face this discomfort in order to experience the comfort and care that God extends to those who humble themselves like this.

And there’s something of a paradox here in the Christian life, that as God grows us in holiness we become more and more sensitive to our lack of holiness. **Derek Thomas** writes, “**From one point of view this cry seemed out of place. Did not Isaiah have the cleanest lips in Jerusalem? Had he not spoken the Word of God? In comparison with his fellow citizens, Isaiah**

was a holy man. But as all Christians will know, the more we know of God, the more sinful by comparison we feel ourselves to be.”²

Think of the apostle Paul. I think of him as maybe one of the holiest men who has ever lived. But he called himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). So I ask you, Do you have a growing awareness of your own sinfulness? Do you have an increasing sensitivity to the tendencies of your old self, that sinful nature that still lurks within you? Do you realize how bad you were, and how much of that badness still needs to be put to death? Do you understand your need for repentance, and your need for a Savior?

If you’re still saying to yourself, I’m pretty clean, I’m pretty good, then do you know what you’re missing? You’re not seeing the holiness of God! When I whisper those things to myself, in the privacy of my own thoughts (that I’m pretty good), it’s because I’m forgetting about the blazing holiness of the Lord Almighty. Friends, brothers and sisters, we need to see what Isaiah saw. We need to meditate on this long and hard. We need to pray for the Holy Spirit to emblazon this vision on our minds and hearts so that we won’t think too highly of ourselves, so that we will think very highly of the Lord.

His Provision

And then we end with a beautiful description of the Lord’s provision for poor Isaiah. Isaiah is undone in the presence of the Lord’s holiness. He confesses his uncleanness. Verses 6-7 then tell us what the Lord provided for this sinful and humble servant.

“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.”” (Isaiah 6:6–7)

Now, when I’ve read this in the past I’ve usually cringed, thinking about the pain Isaiah must have felt as that burning coal touched his lips. But that doesn’t seem to be the point. Maybe it was painful, maybe it wasn’t. Isaiah doesn’t tell us. But what is clear is that this is no punishment for Isaiah, but rather sheer grace. Isaiah is not being punished here for his unclean lips. Rather, he is being cleansed. What takes place here is somewhat mysterious. The seraphim with the burning coal from the altar (that’s significant, that this comes from the altar), and then touching

²*God Delivers: Isaiah Simply Explained*, Derek Thomas, page 64.

Isaiah's lips with it (after Isaiah had confessed being a man of unclean lips).

If we weren't given some explanation, it would be hard to know exactly what to make of this. But we are given an explanation. The seraphim tells Isaiah exactly what these actions signify. "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

That is sheer grace. That is what the Lord provides. It's no accomplishment of Isaiah's. He is totally passive in this scene. All he does is express his brokenness, confess his sin. And the Lord sends this winged, angelic creature swooping down to deliver a pardon, to pronounce Isaiah guiltless, to give him the Good News that his sins are atoned for.

To put it in the words of Isaiah 1:18, which we looked at a few weeks ago, "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

This is the forgiveness that comes from the altar where the sacrifice has been made. Later in this book of Isaiah we're going to encounter a vivid description of the Suffering Servant who would be that sacrifice. The One who "**was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth**" (Isaiah 53:7). And it is "with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

You know it's interesting in the Gospel of John where parts of Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53 are quoted as descriptions of Jesus' ministry, the following verse says, "**Isaiah said these things because he saw his [that is, Jesus'] glory and spoke of him**" (John 12:41). What an incredible connection we see there. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and the Lord of hosts of Isaiah 6 is one and the same. It is our Lord Jesus Christ, who laid Himself on that altar to atone for our sins, who rose on the third day, ascended to heaven, who is high and lifted, who is holy and glorious and deserves our unending praise.

Let us all look to Him, as Isaiah did, and behold His majesty and glory and holiness. Let us humbly confess our sins to Him, and then receive His provision that erases our guilt, atones for our transgressions.

For this is what we've seen here in Isaiah 6, and I pray the Holy Spirit will cause us to experience it in a way that is

unforgettable. In this passage, through the eyes of Isaiah, through this amazing experience that Isaiah had and recorded, we've see the Lord's holiness. We've seen what our response should be. And we've seen the Lord's wonderful provision on our behalf.