

God is...

Holy and True

Isaiah 6:1-7

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¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ⁵ "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:1-7).

Have you ever been in the presence of greatness? I have. Kind of. Last year, Marty and I took a long-awaited vacation to see Boston. The timing worked out that we were there for the last week of the NBA regular season. So, being a life-long, die-hard Celtics fan, I invested a couple years' worth of birthday, Christmas, and Father's Day gifts and bought us two great seats for the Celtics game against the Cleveland Cavaliers. This is how close we were to LeBron James. I was so happy. . . I had seen the King (James).

A couple of weeks ago, after LeBron had, once again, dumped my Boston Celtics in Game 7 of the NBA Eastern Conference Finals, he paid tribute to the One who had given him the ability to play basketball so well. He said, "The Man Above has given me a God-given ability and I just try to take full advantage of it." Another of his euphemisms is "The Man Upstairs." It always puzzles me that people in our culture will freely take the name of God in vain, but when it comes to talking about God, all they can do is fumble about with "MU." I commend LeBron for acknowledging that his talents are God-given. But he's better at basketball than he is at theology, the study of God, what we're embarking on this summer.

What is God like? Is God really the "Man Upstairs"? How would we even know? We'd do best by listening to someone who has seen Him, and that's what we're going to do this morning. And we're going to learn what happens to someone in the presence of God.

Our text today opens, verse one, "in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD." It was 740 B.C., Uzziah had ruled well for most of his 52 years. He had fortified the country, expanded its borders, and improved its economy. But at the end of his life, he grew proud and so God struck him with leprosy. As he is buried in shame outside the royal cemetery, neighboring Assyria is on the rise and the future is very uncertain. As the earthly king was dying, Isaiah saw the heavenly King. It is when times are dark that we most need to see God. Perhaps you need this vision today.

Before we jump in, there's a question we need to ask: Can people really see God? For starters, He's a spirit and we can't see spirits with our physical eyes. John 1:18 says that no man has seen God at any time. First Timothy 6:16 says He dwells in unapproachable light whom no one has seen or can see.

And yet, Exodus 24:9-11, Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 elders went up Mt. Sinai and "saw the God of Israel." And under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. Moses, when he asked to see the glory of God (Ex. 33:20), "But you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" was only allowed to see the back of God as He passed by. Ezekiel had a vision of heaven and saw above the sky a throne, like sapphire, and above the throne someone with a human appearance, who looked like he was burning with fire all around.

The apostle John had perhaps the best look at this divine person and saw, "one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of His head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and His voice was like the roar of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and His face was like the sun shining in full strength." (Rev. 1:13-16)

What is going on here? It is true that no one has seen God in His essence, His fullness. They have only seen the manifestation of the glory of God in human form, not as He is in Himself but as He had accommodated Himself to the capacities of a finite man. "He graciously condescends to clothe now this side of His nature and now that with visibility for the instruction and comfort of His people."¹ So, in our text today, "there was exhibited to Isaiah such a form as enabled him, according to his capacity, to perceive the inconceivable majesty of the glory of God."²

Isaiah, in a vision, is given a glimpse of the throne room of heaven. Adonai. The Lord, sovereign one. Plural—Trinity. There, John tells us in 12:41, he saw the glory of Jesus, the pre-incarnate Word of God, on His throne.

It would be easiest this morning if God would just appear to us—we would not need a sermon with words, we'd just get it, like Isaiah did. But for now, we will have to make do with words, with Isaiah's description of his experience, so imagine with me that you are now going with him into the presence of God. And there, four things happen.

SEE THE MAJESTY OF GOD (vv. 1-2)

His description is interesting; it is of the surroundings of the King not the Lord Himself.

1. "On a throne" (v. 1). It's hard for us in a democratic society to appreciate what a throne meant. This was not the Oval Office, as powerful a place as that is. A king ruled from his throne and he judged from his throne, he was a supreme ruler, sovereign, no one could question him.
2. "Sitting" (v. 1). He is content, unhurried, unworried, unchallenged
3. This throne was "high and lifted up" (v. 1). Height is a position of knowledge and power. You get the image of a lofty mountain peak with Isaiah tilting his head upward to try to take in the whole scene, but it's alive. God sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.

¹ Moyter, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: an Introduction & Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1993.

² Calvin, Jean. *Isaiah*. Crossway Books, 2000.

4. “The train of His robe filled the temple” (v. 1). He is so big, the world cannot hold Him.
5. Even above Him stood the seraphim (v 2). Notice: creatures stand in the presence of the Creator! The word seraphim means “fiery beings” and only seen here in the Bible, traditionally the highest order of celestial beings. They had six wings, one pair covered face (reverence), one pair covered the feet (humility), one pair flew (service). Ready to carry out the will of the One on the throne.

It is clear that Isaiah is in the presence of someone upstairs—but He’s not a man! And upstairs is very, very high. So high, that He stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth (Ps. 113:6). This makes Isaiah seem minuscule in comparison.

FEEL THE HOLINESS OF GOD (vv. 3-5)

The seraphim are apparently in two semicircles around the throne and they call out to each other in antiphonal fashion, “Holy, holy, holy” (v. 3). It is the same song that the four living creatures sing around the throne in heaven in Revelation 4:8. Three times for emphasis, a superlative, of super importance, the only time a characteristic of God is thrice repeated in the Bible because holiness is not as much an attribute of God as it is a summation of who He is. Let me explain.

Holiness is not exactly the same as righteousness. When we say that God is holy we don’t just mean that He hasn’t done anything wrong. The primary meaning of “holy” is “separate.” The Hebrew word “*qadosh*” means to cut off or to be separated. So, to be holy is to be completely different, to be a separate category altogether from everything else, to be “other.” There is an infinite chasm between the Creator and His creation. **Holiness= wholly other.**

“He is higher than the world. He has absolute power over the world. The world has no power over Him. Transcendence describes God in His consuming majesty, His exalted loftiness. It points to the infinite distance that separates Him from every creature. When the Bible calls God holy it means primarily that God is transcendently separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us.”³ As Stephen Charnock said, “it is like the light of a glow-worm to that of the sun.”⁵

One example is the difference between me and LeBron. It’s a pretty big gap. Now between LeBron and an ant? Huge. But the difference between LeBron—or you and me—and God? Farther away than the moon. It can’t even be measured in distance. It is a qualitative difference or, if you like philosophy, an ontological difference, of being. Ants and humans, we’re both creatures. We both build things, we’re just a little better than they are. But God can create out of nothing. Try that! Like God’s questions to Job in Job 38-41.

Remember when the disciples were on the lake in their boat and a terrible storm came up and they were scared out of their wits? Jesus, asleep, woke up, said literally two words (“Be quiet,” or “be muzzled”) and the wind and the waves obeyed Him. But the disciples, instead of being calm, were afraid all over again—but for a different

³ Sproul, R. C. *Class Teachings on the Nature of God: Three Volumes in One*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2010.

⁵ Charnock, Stephen, and William Symington. *The Existence and Attributes of God*. Baker Books, 2000.

reason. They said to one another, “What kind of man is this?” In the power of Christ they met something more powerful than anything they had seen in the power of nature. They were in the presence of the holy, a different category, not just a man at all, but something that we have never seen before. As He says in Isaiah 46:9, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.”

It was the same thing the Israelites sang to God after He delivered them from Egypt, “who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders” (v. Ex. 15:11)?

So, holiness is not just another in a long list of the attributes of God; it is the essence of who He is as God. As Sproule said, it is a synonym for His deity. All of His attributes are holy: love, justice, mercy, knowledge, truth.

This is what the seraphim are chanting, that this God is different, higher, greater, more awesome than all who surround Him. In fact, the whole earth, all of creation, is full of His glory. God’s glory is simply the revelation of His attributes. That means that everywhere on earth it is obvious that there is a Creator as Paul says in Romans 1:20, “His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world.” His world is the wide theater in which His greatness is displayed. As the seraphim speak, the foundations of the thresholds shook and the house was filled with smoke (v. 4). As Sproule said, “even wood and metal had the good sense to be moved by the presence of God.”³

So, what of the idea of purity? “Purity is not excluded from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it.” (Sproule, p. 57) God is holy in His purity. In other words, He is pure like no one and nothing else. “We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest level we are capable of. God’s holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered.” (Tozer) We have learned to live with unholiness, see it as the natural, expected thing. He has never sinned, He can never sin, is never tempted by sin. 1 John. 1:5 says, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.” **Holiness= wholly pure.** As Revelation 4:6 says, “in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.”

Habakkuk 1:13 says, “your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.” Not only has God done nothing wrong (loves righteousness), but His holiness at the same time makes Him hate wickedness. He hates whatever is against His nature, His will. To preserve His creation, He must destroy whatever would destroy it. So, He hates sin the way a mother hates cancer that is destroying her child’s body.

All this Isaiah takes in as he tries to grasp the incomparable majesty and otherness of God. But now he feels His holiness. Once he sees God’s holiness, he is aware that God’s holiness is seeing him. He suddenly realizes he is not just in a theater seat watching a drama, but he in fact is on the stage. We don’t just look at God’s majesty like we might look at the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls— be impressed, say wow, then walk away. No, Isaiah, like us, is now a part of the story, and that immediately creates a problem for him (v. 5). In light of God’s majesty, He felt minuscule; in light of His holiness, he feels condemned. He then understood what the Psalmist meant when he said, “who may ascend the hill of the Lord, who may stand in His holy place?” (Psalm 24:3) He’s like the kid who has come into the house with muddy shoes— onto the freshly mopped kitchen floor—and he gets that look. He’s busted.

Isaiah was a prophet, not perfect, but probably one of the most righteous people around. In the presence of God, he is suddenly made acutely aware of a very important fact: God doesn't grade on a curve. And he's busted, big time. He has sinned with his lips. That doesn't mean he let a bad word slip when he hit his thumb with a hammer. Our words reveal what is in our hearts. As Jesus said, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from heart, and this defiles a person" (Mt. 15:18). And Isaiah is not alone, for he has been defiled by being around others who are sinners like himself, each compounding the sin of the other.

He is now marked as a dead man in the presence of a holy God. "Woe" is me (v.5). This means he is doomed to die, ruined. It is the same word used in Isaiah chapter 5 when Isaiah speaks of judgment on nations. Now he pronounces woe on himself. He is saying: I have tracked my sin into a holy place, into the presence of a holy God, and here there is absolutely a zero-tolerance policy. So I'm done. The vision had revealed the heights of God's majesty, the breadths of His holiness, and the depths of man's uncleanness.

Our spiritual sensitivity to sin is dulled because we have lost sight of a holy God. Even one sin is repulsive in His sight. How is it that any of us can escape an encounter with God?

EXPERIENCE THE FORGIVENESS OF GOD (vv. 6-7)

But God. God has brought Isaiah into His presence, not with the intention of incinerating him, as he now knew he rightly deserved, but rescuing him. The initiative is God's, as it has been all along. There's no indication in the text that a word was spoken from the throne, but it can be assumed since the seraphim did nothing on their own accord. And it's interesting that though they covered their eyes and feet, they did not cover their ears like we are sometimes wont to do!

There is an altar in heaven, previously unmentioned, but perhaps it is the cause of all the smoke in verse 4. Altars were used for one thing in the Old Testament: sacrifices. And the blood of the sacrifices was poured out on the altar (Deut. 12:27). One seraphim flies to the altar, takes a burning hot coal, using tongs, from the fire, and then flies over to Isaiah.

You wonder what he is thinking at this point? Is this how God is going to destroy me, to punish me for my sin? Why then, only one piece of coal? But something else has already died on the altar so that I don't have to, and its death is now being applied to my sin. The coal is pressed against his lips—the organ that revealed his sin—it burns away the sin, and the seraphim announces that his guilt is taken away and his sin is now atoned for. The live coal reminds us that behind the love that takes away our guilt and the forgiveness that cleanses us is a cross that atoned for our sins.

There is a fountain where you can be washed clean. In fact, your sins can be made as white as snow. Jesus is our sacrificial lamb who has been slaughtered on the altar for us. His death, when applied by faith, can touch us and burn away all our sin. So that we hear the words of God to us, "behold, your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for" (v. 7) God is not just a majestic monarch and a holy King, but also a forgiving God.

RESPOND TO THE CALL OF GOD (v. 8)

What does this kind of mercy do to someone? When you've been on the brink of disaster, due completely to your own folly, when one moment you were as good as dead and now you live again? It changes your heart, doesn't it? That someone would love you so much, care for you enough to provide a way out, and in a way that cost Him dearly—the suffering and shame and anguish and pain of the cross. You can never look at that One the same way again. He who has been forgiven much loves much. In light of God's forgiveness, we feel grateful, indebted. And gratefulness makes us ready, to serve.

It's fascinating to me what happens next. In a sense, the story could end right here: drama, danger, climax, resolution, and a sigh of relief. You might expect verse 8 to read, "and Isaiah fell down and worshipped at the foot of the One on the throne, thanking Him for saving His life." He may have—but if so, that part's not recorded because there's more to the story. The more to the story is that there are more people than Isaiah in the world, and they all need to know this great God.

Our faith in God is about more than our individual worship. It begins there. You will meet this God, so you can't opt out. Be reconciled to Him today!

God is on a mission. He now speaks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (v. 8) What is the task? Isaiah doesn't ask. He doesn't need to know in order to respond. His heart says if this God, this holy King, this loving Savior, has something to be done, then I want to be like those seraphim, a willing servant. So, he says, "here I am." Translation: "I'm yours. You've won me. Send me to do whatever you want me to do wherever you want me to do it. As Charles Spurgeon said, "a burning heart will soon find for itself a flaming tongue."⁹ This is the Call to Go.

As you read the rest of the chapter, Isaiah's mission was different than ours today. Ours is equally clear. God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. And how will they do that? Romans 10:14 says, "how then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" That means here, Brookside, and around the world.

CONCLUSION

How do you get into the presence of God? You don't need a vision, you can just come by faith, seeing Him who is invisible. As you come, you will see Him in His majesty. You will understand Him in His holiness. You can experience His grace in forgiveness, and then you'll be a joyful servant of His, wherever He sends you.

⁹ Spurgeon, C. H. *Lectures to My Students: A Selection from Addresses Delivered to the Students of The Pastors College, Metropolitan Tabernacle*. Vol. 3, Passmore and Alabaster, 1885.

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