

The Holiness Of God

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Isaiah 6:1-8 says, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.” Isaiah is a prophet, and this is a record of his call. He doesn’t begin to mention his call until chapter 6, but he is recording this vision that he received of the holiness of God in the temple when God called him and commissioned him to be a prophet.

So Isaiah saw “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another...”—so the seraphim are singing to one another—“...and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy...’—there’s our theme—“...is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!’ And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.”

Verse 5, “So I said: ‘Woe is me, for I am undone! Because 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.’ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.’ Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’”

If there is just one thing that God wants us to know about His nature and His essence, I would say that it is the holiness of God. The chief attribute of God, revealed by God in His Holy Word, is the attribute of His holiness. The attributes of God in Scripture are all controlled and permeated by His holiness.

Yet the holiness of God is the one we ignore the most and understand the least. I think, as I studied it, that it is the most difficult thing to wrap your mind around. That’s why it is a subject that is difficult to preach. I was so overwhelmed with the magnitude of the subject that I again felt like the proverbial child at the seashore trying to catch the whole ocean in his bucket. It’s impossible to understand it completely. But if God wants us to know anything about Him, it is that He wants us to know that He is a holy God.

We like to focus on the love of God, we like to focus on the grace of God—and that’s understandable—but God’s love and God’s grace are a holy love and a holy grace. It’s interesting that nowhere in Scripture is God called “love, love, love.” You don’t read about a vision where the prophet sees the angels around the throne crying, “Love, love, love” or “Mercy, mercy, mercy” or “Grace, grace, grace” or “Truth, truth, truth.” Not even “Eternal, eternal, eternal.”

But we do find, in two places in the Bible, where God is called “Holy, holy, holy.” The first one is in our text, in Isaiah 6:3. In the book of Isaiah, God is called “holy” 30 times. The second one is

in Revelation 4:8. Isaiah 6:3 says, “And one cried to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.’” The phrase “Lord of hosts” is Jehovah Sabaoth, which means “the Lord of the host of angels.” Then it says, “The whole earth is full of His glory!” This glory is the radiance of His holiness.

The second reference is in Revelation, where John sees the throne of God and the angels around the throne. Revelation 4:8 says, “The four living creatures...”—this probably refers to the same seraphim that are only mentioned in Isaiah, which are an elite order of angels that worship God—“...each having six wings....And they do not rest day or night, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’”

Thomas Watson, a Puritan preacher, said, “Holiness is the most sparkling jewel of God’s crown. It is the name by which He is known.” I like that picture. Isaiah 57:15 says, “For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy.” Over and over again the Bible says His name is “Holy.” When the Bible uses the figure of speech of “the name of the Lord,” it is talking about His nature and His character. So intrinsically, eternally, transcendently and gloriously God is holy.

In Revelation 15:4, John hears the saints in heaven singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. A portion of that song is, “For you alone are holy.” When we get to heaven and we’re singing with all the saints of the ages, the theme in our songs is holiness. So God is holy in a way that no one or nothing else is holy.

We have the holy angels, the holy prophets, the Holy Bible, but God is the source of all holiness. And God cannot exist without being holy. Everything God does is holy. So holiness is complete in His nature; nothing can be a part of God that is not holy and glorious.

The classic text on the holiness of God is in Isaiah 6. You ask anyone where to find a reference to the holiness of God, and they’ll turn to Isaiah 6.

In Isaiah’s vision, he saw three things. I’ll put them into three categories. First, Isaiah saw the holy Lord, verses 1-4. Second, he saw himself as sinful, verses 5-7. And third, he saw the need —“Here am I! Send me,” verse 8. This was the commissioning and calling of Isaiah.

Verse 1 says, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.” The year King Uzziah died was about 739 BC. For 52 years, King Uzziah ruled as a good king. He had reigned in Judah and had been a blessing to the nation. Now with his death, the throne is vacated.

So there is an intended contrast here. Isaiah was saying that Judah’s precious king was no longer on the throne. But Isaiah saw the throne in heaven, where God, the Lord of glory, sits on the throne.

And we may be looking at who is sitting on the “throne” of the White House and cry, “Woe is me!” But lift your eyes a little higher and see that the Lord sits on the throne. He rules from

heaven. God is sovereign in His holiness and righteousness.

Yes, it's a bad time for the nation. But it's a good time, because God is on His throne. Whenever the outlook is bad, try the "uplook." You may be discouraged now, because you're looking at who's on the "throne" here. You need to get your eyes on who's on the throne in heaven.

Where it says, "The train of His robe filled the temple" implies that there is room for no one else. God fills the temple with His majesty and His glory and His splendor. God says, "You shall have no other gods before Me," in the Decalogue.

Verse 2 says, "Above it stood seraphim." This is the only place in the Bible where we have reference to the seraphim, who are an order of angelic beings. There are different kinds of angels. These seraphim seem to be a reference to this elite group of angels that gather around the throne and worship the Lord.

Notice their description. They have six wings: two wings covered their face, which speaks of reverent humility; two wings covered their feet, which speaks of self-efficiency; and two wings they flew with, which speaks of service to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

What they said was, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory! And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke." The majesty and holiness of God is said to have moved the doorposts by His voice, and the whole temple was shaken.

Here Isaiah has a vision that was what we call a revelation of the holiness of God. God cannot be known apart from revelation. So God would give the people dreams, visions, He would send angels and He would send prophets. But God has given us His Word. God can speak in these other ways, but they will never be inconsistent with His Word. The chief, primary way by which God reveals Himself is by "The B-i-b-l-e; yes, that's the book for me. I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-i-b-l-e." I learned that in Sunday school, and I haven't forgotten it. And you'd be wise to put it into practice in your own life.

The Bible alone is God's ultimate authority. It is objective truth that cannot lie, which God gave to us by His Holy Spirit from the God of truth.

We need a vision of God as holy. In the church, we have lost that vision of the holiness of God. We have all these different concepts of God: of God as a grandfather, who spoils his grandchildren and gives them whatever they want; of God as a heavenly genie, and when we rub the lamp "in the name of Jesus," we get a new car or a new house.

I was watching a preacher on TV, who said that God wants to bless you and give you a new watch, a new house, a new car and more money in the bank. How sad. He was one of these health-and-wealth prosperity preachers, who told people that God wants them rich.

God wants you rich in spiritual things, and He may bless you materially, but it doesn't do any good to have the things the world can give, if you don't have the things that God can give. And if there is anything that God wants us to have, it is for us to be holy, because He is holy. He wants us to see Him, to worship Him and to serve Him as a holy God.

I want to define what it means that God is "holy." A theologian, Hodges, said, "The holiness of God is not to be conceived of as one among many attributes. It is rather a general term representing the conception of God's consummate perfection and total glory." I like that concept. Holiness is more of a general term that conveys "God's consummate perfection and total glory." It is His infinite, moral perfection crowning His infinite intelligence and His power.

What I believe the holiness of God literally means is that God is set apart. The words "holy, sanctify and saint" literally mean "set apart." Sometimes we have a difficult time understanding what "holy" means. We have "holy" sanctuary, the "holy" apostles, the "Holy" Bible. "Holy" means "set apart, unique, different."

But only God is perfectly holy or unique. It has two aspects: negative and positive. The negative is that no sin, no darkness, no wickedness, no evil is in God. He is the complete absence of anything that is evil. In 1 John 1:5, it says, "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." What a marvelous truth about the holiness of God.

The positive side of the holiness of God is that God is perfectly righteous, perfectly holy and in Him dwells the presence of all that is good, beautiful and righteous. So He has no sin and is perfect in righteousness. Holiness also carries the concept that God is transcendent, unique and eternally holy.

When I think about these attributes of God—I know they stretch our minds, because we are finite and God is infinite—it amazes me to think that God is love and God is holy. The God of the Bible is love, but His love is a holy, righteous love. It means that God is pure, beautiful and glorious. Everything that God is, everything that God thinks, everything that God feels, everything that God does is holy. God cannot sin or do evil. The Bible says, "God is not a man, that He should lie."

Do you know that there are things that God can't do? God cannot lie. Isn't that good? We do it quite easily. But not God. It's not a part of His nature. It's not part of who He is. God cannot lie. There is no darkness in Him at all.

James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights..."—there's His holiness—"...with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." This passage teaches us two things: God is holy, and God is immutable or unchangeable.

So we have this loving God, this holy God, this eternal God and this immutable God who doesn't change. What a marvelous truth that is.

Of all the attributes of God, they are all influenced and controlled by His love and His holiness. His love is a holy love. His mercy is a holy mercy. His compassion is a holy compassion. His justice is a holy justice. Even His “omni” attributes—all knowing, all powerful, all present—are influenced by His holiness.

Psalms 111:9 says, “Holy and awesome is His name.” Psalm 145:17 says, “The Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious...”—or “holy”—“...in all His works.” Everything God does is holy—in all His works and in all His ways. Revelation 15:4 says, “Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy.” I like that.

So in heaven we’re going to be singing, “Lord, only You are holy!” I like that idea of God being separate from sinners and unique. Only God is holy.

Now how can we better grasp this supernatural, nebulous concept of the transcendence and holiness of God? How can we better understand it and grasp it? I’m limited in my understanding, even as a preacher. But the Scriptures don’t just talk about God’s holiness; they reveal God’s holiness. The Bible tells us that God is holy and it shows us that God is holy.

There are different ways that God reveals His holiness to us. It could be an extensive list, but I will give you just a few of them. First, it is revealed in creation. Before The Fall we see God’s holiness, and even after The Fall we see the fingerprints of God’s holiness.

That’s the reason people want to teach evolution; they want to get God’s hand off of creation. But the heavens declare something to us: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth,” Psalm 19:1-4. The heavens speak to us; they speak of the glory of God.

So to negate God, people have to come up with the idea of a “big bang.” It just accidentally all happened. There was no divine plan; it just happened, and here we are today. They don’t believe in a loving, eternal, powerful and holy God, who “created the heavens and the earth.”

Can you imagine what an awesome place it would have been in the Garden of Eden before The Fall? All the animals were domesticated. The whole place was a zoo. You could pet any animal you wanted. You wouldn’t have to worry about being mauled by a bear. You wouldn’t have to worry about anything being dangerous. Adam and Eve were to have dominion over the animals. God’s world was a marvelous place for them to live in.

Genesis 1:31 says, “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.” After each successive day of creation, God said, “It was good.” But on the sixth day, when creation was complete, God said, “It was very good.”

Then the devil came in and tempted Adam and Eve, they sinned and the curse came upon the earth. As a result, Adam had to work and till the soil, and Eve would have pain in childbirth. So

the curse came in and The Fall of man that would reverse what God had created.

But one day Jesus Christ will return and will reverse the curse. He is called the Last Adam. Creation will be restored. We will co-reign with Christ during the millennium, the kingdom age. You'll be able to pet wild animals again; they'll be domesticated. Jesus will restore creation to what it was before The Fall.

The second way God's holiness is displayed is in the law. Psalm 19:7 says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul." This is one of my favorite ways God's holiness is displayed. God's holiness is revealed, explained or declared in His law, which is also a synonym for the Bible, the Word of God. In Romans 7:12, Paul says, "The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good."

So when you read the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, you read that God is holy. "You shall have no other gods before Me." All the commandments in the Decalogue convey, illustrate or show us the holiness of God.

This is why some people don't like the Ten Commandments; we are sinners and don't like the holiness of God. Of all the attributes of God, this is the one we run from, because of our sinful nature. This is the commandment that unregenerated, sinful man hates the most, because God is holy and righteous. So the Ten Commandments display the holiness of God.

Third, God's holiness is seen in His righteous judgments. Genesis 18:25 says, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" That is a rhetorical question expecting a "Yes" answer; "Yes, God will do right." When God judges, He judges rightly.

If you understand the holiness of God, you have no problem with God judging sinners. A lot of people say, "How could God do this?" or "How could God do that?" So here is puny, sinful man shaking his fist at God, who is holy, and we are sinners. We're going to impugn God of unrighteousness?!

God, by right of the fact that He was here first and created all things, could just destroy everything and still be righteous. It's because He is a holy God, and He is the source of all things. We wouldn't be breathing right now, we wouldn't be able to shake our fists at God if He hadn't given us health, breath and life. "The Lord is righteous in all His ways." How marvelous that is.

When God judged the Canaanites in the Old Testament, He did it in holiness and righteousness. In 2 Timothy 4:8, Paul called the Lord, "The righteous judge."

The fourth way God reveals His holiness is in the Tabernacle, in the priesthood and in the Levitical system of approaching God. When the nation of Israel came out of Egypt in the Exodus, God had them pitch a tent in the wilderness, where He lived. And right over the tent was a pillar of fire. These are other ways that God reveals His holiness: by the symbolism of fire and light.

This tent had three sections: the outer court, the holy place and the holy of holies. And between the holy place and the holy of holies was a veil or curtain. In the holy of holies was the Ark of the Covenant. There were two angels carved in gold on top of the Ark where the mercy seat was. In the Ark was the rod of Aaron that budded, a bowl of manna and the Ten Commandments. And God's presence was there over the Ark.

Only once a year could a priest, after sacrificing on the brazen altar, enter into the holy place and offer incense and prayers to God, and then go beyond the veil into the holy of holies. So everything about the Tabernacle, which represented Christ symbolically or as a type of Christ, was a reference to the holiness of God.

You couldn't just walk into God's presence any time you wanted to. There had to first be a blood sacrifice, a perfect way of approaching God. And God was beyond the veil. When Jesus died on the Cross, the veil in the temple was ripped from the top to the bottom. God then made the way for us to come to a holy God. So all this symbolizes what we know to be found in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The fifth way God reveals His holiness was God's greatest revelation: in Jesus Christ and, first, in His Incarnation. Whenever you look at Jesus, you learn that God is holy. When Jesus was born, the Bible tells us that He was born of a virgin. The angel, who probably was Gabriel, said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." Even in His birth, Jesus was holy. How marvelous.

Secondly, in Jesus' baptism He was holy. When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, He came out of the water, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove that alighted on Jesus' head and God spoke audibly from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." Some translations say, "...in Whom My soul delights."

So here we see the Triune nature of God: The Father speaks, the Holy Spirit comes as a dove and Jesus, God the Son, is baptized in the Jordan River. Even in Jesus' birth and baptism, He was set apart and holy.

Third, we see Jesus' holiness in His temptation by the devil. It's interesting that Jesus went from His baptism to the temptation; He was baptized just before He was tempted by the devil. At His baptism, Jesus' Father said, "This is My beloved son, in Whom My soul delights." Then when Jesus went into the desert to be tempted, the devil said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" and "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down" off the temple, so the angels can save Jesus. So you have the voice of the Father contrasting with the voice of Satan tempting Jesus. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, Jesus never sinned. How marvelous to think that Jesus did not sin.

I don't know about you, but I haven't resisted every temptation. We bought chips for the Super Bowl, and all week long I've had dreams and visions; I want those chips. They're for Sunday;

they're "holy" chips. I did resist, however. But I can't always resist every temptation.

Theologians grapple with what's called "the impeccability of Christ." Why they grapple is because they say that if it was really a temptation, then it should come with the capacity to sin. So they don't believe Jesus was impeccable; He could have sinned.

I'm of the persuasion that Jesus could not have sinned, because He was the holy Son of God. And the Bible says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." If He was holy in the past—and He cannot change—there is no way He's going to sin today or in the future. God, who is holy, will always be holy. He was, is and ever shall be a holy God. So I believe in "the impeccability of Christ."

Yes, Jesus "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." We yield to temptation, because we have a sin nature. Jesus had no sin nature. He was faced with real temptation, but He was incapable of sinning. So He was victorious over the temptation of the devil. How marvelous that is.

Fourth, we see Jesus' holiness in the way that He lived. In John 8:46, it says, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" And when Jesus cleansed the temple, He made a whip and drove the money-changers out. His eyes were flaming with righteous indignation. That's the holy Christ.

Even the demons said, "I know who You are—the Holy One of God." So Jesus had demons telling Him that they knew He was "the Holy One of God," setting Him apart as holy.

Then the ultimate display of holiness in His life was Jesus' death.

In John 12:41, John tells us who "the Lord of hosts" is, who is holy, mentioned in Isaiah 6:3. "These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him." In John's text, he is referring to Jesus. So John 12:41 tells us that in Isaiah 6:3, "the Lord of hosts" is none other than Jesus Christ. Isaiah "saw His glory" and Isaiah "spoke of Him."

So having seen the glory of God, in verses 1-4, now Isaiah sees himself as sinful, in verses 5-7. Isaiah now speaks. "So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because 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.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.'"

Why does this tie in to Isaiah's lips? Because the Bible makes it clear that "Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." You want to know where someone's heart is? Listen to their mouth. I'm so grieved that in our culture today there is so much vulgarity. You can't go anywhere in public without hearing profanity. It's a grievance to the holiness of God.

So Isaiah knew that his heart needed to be changed by the blood of Christ in order to be forgiven. And I believe that verses 5-7 is an Old Testament picture of the Crucifixion, of the

death of Christ. I'm not saying Isaiah understood that or that God intended that; I'm saying that it is a picture or a reminder to us that we are sinners who need to be purged, cleansed and washed of our sin and iniquity to be made holy. When we see God as holy, we see ourselves as sinners.

2 Corinthians 5:21 is one of the great passages in the Bible explaining the Cross of Christ. "For He made Him who knew no sin..."—that is, "Christ, who is holy"—"...to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

There are two important doctrines taught in this passage. The first is substitution—Jesus took our place and bore our sin. Jesus was "the Lamb of God" slain for the sins of the world. Why would Jesus have to die? He was born of a virgin and lived a sinless life. "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" He was the sinless One. But voluntarily, vicariously, substitutionarily He gave His life on the Cross and died for our sins.

And we don't know why God chose that plan, but God demands that "The soul who sins shall die." But in His love and holiness, He provided Christ to die. God's broken law must be paid for and atonement made. When we see the holiness of God, we see the sinfulness of man. We see that the broken law must be atoned for, and it was in the blood of the Lamb. So Jesus gave Himself as a substitution and to impute to us His righteousness. So this was the exchange; He took our sins and gave us His righteousness. So in the theater of the Cross, we see not only the love of God but we see the holiness of God.

In Isaiah 6:7 it says, "Your iniquity is taken away and your sin purged." There are three ways that God makes us holy. The first is imputed, positional holiness; the second is imparted, practical holiness; and the third is perfect, complete holiness. We have been saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. Or we've been justified, we are being sanctified and we will be glorified. There are three tenses to salvation.

The second doctrine in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is imputation. God first imputes holiness to us positionally to the person who believes in Jesus. Through faith in Christ in His substitutionary death on the Cross, God will impute to you, a sinner, the righteousness of Christ. You are robed in Christ's righteousness. You can't get any holier; you're perfectly holy.

Secondly, as you live the Christian life, He imparts practical holiness, through the Holy Spirit's presence in your heart and life. When you become a Christian, you're not only given new life; you're indwelt by the Spirit. You let Him control you and He will produce holiness in you. So He imparts, practically, the power of the Holy Spirit to make us holy.

I was thinking that marriage is called "holy matrimony." It is holy; it's unique, it's divine and it's of God. It's a God-ordained institution. You can't redefine marriage. But our culture wants to do everything they can to get rid of God, so they try to redefine marriage or eliminate marriage altogether. There is only one holy matrimony, and that's the way God ordained it—between one man and one woman.

And marriage reflects the Godhead, the nature of God; of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. "The two shall become one flesh." Marriage is a holy institution. It is one of the ways that God's fingerprint is in the world around us.

Thirdly, He makes us complete. So he imputes His holiness to us, He practically imparts His holiness to us and He makes us complete; or positional, practical and perfect. "Perfect" or "complete" is glorification.

One day we will be in heaven, and then we will be perfectly holy like God. We will have no more sin. There will be no more Satan. No more sickness, no more darkness. There is no night in heaven, only constant light, because of the holiness and righteousness of God.

The definition of these seraphim, these angels, literally means "the burning ones." When Adam and Eve sinned, they were driven from the Garden of Eden, and God placed an angel "with a flaming sword" at the entrance of the Garden to keep Adam and Eve out. That was because God cannot have fellowship with unrighteousness. All through the Bible God's holiness is imprinted.

1 Peter 1:15-16 says, "As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'" That is a quote from Leviticus 11:44. So the blood of Christ and the power of the Spirit enables us to be holy before God.

In verse 8, Isaiah saw the need. By the way, Isaiah's whole vision is audio visual; he both hears and sees. So he saw the Lord, he saw himself and that he needed to be forgiven and now he sees the need. "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?'" or for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. "Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.'"

The question is, "Who shall go for Us? Who can I send to this dark, sinful world to preach?" We usually say, "Send my neighbor. Send the guy next door." Isaiah didn't say that. He said, "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah sees God as holy; he gets a revelation of God's holiness. Isaiah is convicted, he confesses his sin, he is cleansed, he is called—the consecration and the commission to preach to a hard world of unbelievers. That's the story of Isaiah's call.

We too are called to go into the culture around us to reflect the holiness of God. If God wants to be known by anything, it is that He wants to be known as holy. He says, "Be holy, for I am holy."

A low view of the holiness of God leads to a low view of man's sin. A high view of the holiness of God leads to an understanding that I am a sinner in need of a Savior, that we should worship God and serve Him with reverence, in humility and in godly fear.