

Introduction:

"The sinner hates nothing as much as he hates the holiness of God. It judges him and threatens him, and often drives him to atheism because he would rather believe in no God at all than in a holy God."¹ What a profound statement. I am convinced it is not simply sinners who struggle with God's holiness, but even we Christians. While none of us would claim to hate God's holiness, I don't hear very many of us talking about it very much either. We love to talk about His comforting actions toward us like God's grace, love, and mercy. We love to talk about amazing attributes that simply describe Him without making any demands on us like His omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. We love to talk about His presence, His power, His pre-eminence. But His holiness? That often just gets a nod. Why? Because when we dig into God's holiness we find a frightening reality to which we simply do not measure up. We find a certain reality that we are worthless, lost, destitute, despicable, and undeserving. We are broken down and all hope that we can somehow impress God or measure up to Him is lost. And so, we don't often dig deep at the holiness of God. But if we truly want to understand God's love and grace, if we truly want to appreciate God's presence and power, we must first wrestle with this, His fundamental characteristic: God is holy. See what happens when Isaiah came face to face with God's holiness in **Isaiah 6:1-7**.

Discussion:

I. Holy, holy, holy.

- A. There is no doubt God is holy. The seraphim cry out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts." This triple declaration (repeated in **Revelation 4:8**) is not simply poetic license. It is a declaration that God is holy to the uttermost. As one said, this triple declaration expresses "an extraordinary superlative of unheard of intensity."² No other characteristic of God is ever trebled like this. Nowhere in God's Word will we find, "Love, love, love is the Lord God Almighty." Nor will we find "Eternal, eternal, eternal" or "Omniscient, omniscient, omniscient." No doubt these are great characteristics of God. But holiness is the fundamental characteristic, and the Bible is full of the declaration of God's holiness.
1. "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?" (**Exodus 15:11**, ESV).
 2. "There is none holy like the LORD; for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God" (**I Samuel 2:2**, ESV).
 3. "God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne" (**Psalms 47:8**, ESV).
 4. "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation" (**Psalms 68:5**, ESV).
 5. "Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?" (**Psalms 77:13**, ESV).
 6. "They tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel" (**Psalms 78:41**, ESV).
 7. "Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!...Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy" (**Psalms 99:5, 9**, ESV).
 8. "But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness" (**Isaiah 5:16**, ESV).
- B. This just scratches the surface. We could multiply passages declaring the holiness of God, His Son, and His Holy Spirit. Is there any doubt the fundamental attribute, the foundational characteristic, the baseline for the understanding of God is His superlative holiness? If we do not begin here, we cannot understand or truly appreciate His love and grace. Praise be to the holy God!

II. Distinction

- A. But what is holiness? What is this fundamental characteristic? The most basic definition of the word "holy" is "to cut, to separate."³ Thus, when something is holy it is separated from everything else. The triple declaration of God's holiness is the superlative claim that God is distinct. We can see this in two ways.

¹ Cottrell, Jack, What the Bible Says about God the Redeemer, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 1987, pp. 254-255. Quoting from Stephen Charnock, The Existence and Attributes of God, Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1958, pp. 500-501.

² Ibid. p. 245, quoting Petro B. T. Bilaniuk, "The Holiness of God in Eastern Orthodoxy," God: The Contemporary Discussion, ed. Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant, Rose of Sharon Press, New York, 1982, p. 46.

³ Ibid. p. 245. See also Jack Cottrell, What the Bible Says about God the Creator, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 1983, p. 213.

1. *Majestic holiness/Transcendent holiness*: God is distinct because He is divine and there is no other divine. We are human, not divine. Even the angelic beings, while spiritual are not divine. Nothing demonstrates this majesty and transcendence like **Genesis 1:1**. God is Creator and everything else is creature. Even these magnificent winged seraphim in **Isaiah 6** and the four living creatures of **Revelation 4** declare this distinction and separation in superlative terms. If powerful creatures with eyes that see all and wings that carry them everywhere declare God as distinct, separate, and above, what are we left saying? Did you notice that in three of the verses we quoted the declaration of holiness meant there is no one like God (see **Exodus 15:11**; **I Samuel 2:2**; **Psalm 77:13**). **Psalm 50:21** drives this home. God is not like us.
 2. *Ethical holiness*: God is distinct because He is pure, perfect, ethically holy. He is right in all His dealings. As **I John 1:5** says, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (ESV). God is so ethically holy He cannot tempt or even be tempted (cf. **James 1:13**). **Psalm 5:4** claims God is so holy evil cannot dwell with Him. **Habakkuk 1:13** says God cannot even look at evil and wrong.
- B. It is this second aspect that should really impact us. Because God’s ethical holiness is far more than simply His own personal sinlessness. It also deals with His attitudes toward righteousness and sin. Consider **Psalm 45:6-7a**: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness” (ESV). Whether this is a direct statement about God, about God’s messiah, or a blessing on King David, it tells us the attitude God has and values. God is not only upright and holy in Himself, but this holiness leads to a love and zeal for uprightness, not only in Himself but in His creatures. That leads Him to demand holiness in His creation. In both covenants, God declares to His people: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (**Leviticus 19:2**; **I Peter 1:16**). And at the same time, God not only has stayed away from sin personally, He hates sin. His holiness mandates His absolute opposition to sin. We cannot stress this enough. Whenever anyone questions the eternal punishment of the sinner as harsh, they are running headlong into this aspect of God’s holiness. They do not understand the absolutely holy nature of God that simply cannot view sin, any sin, all sin, no matter how trivial it seems to us, with anything other than absolute hatred. He must, by His very nature strive to stamp it out and drive it from His very presence. Whenever someone complains that eternal separation from God is too steep a price to pay for some sin, they are missing the entire point. Sin is not bad because of how it compares to other sins. Neither is it worse based on the amount of harm it causes us and other sinners. Sin, all sin, no matter how seemingly trivial to us, is a cosmic affront to the supreme holiness of God. Sin, all sin, no matter how seemingly trivial to us, is an attack against the holiness of God and defiles His holy handiwork. And thus, when Adam and Eve did the seemingly trivial thing of eating the wrong piece of fruit, they were spiritually separated from God and must be driven from His very presence.

III. Woe is me.

- A. And now we can understand Isaiah’s reaction in **Isaiah 6:5**. “Woe is me! For I am lost; 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” (ESV). Do not miss what this is. This is fear. This is terror. Isaiah grasped God’s holiness, God’s glory. But along with that, Isaiah grasped that he was exactly opposite. And because of this separation, this distinction, he deserved death in the presence of this holy God.
- B. But do not miss the full confession of Isaiah here. This throne room vision occurs on the heels of Isaiah’s vineyard song (**Isaiah 5**) in which God proclaims woe on the wicked and on His enemies, explaining why He is going to have to destroy His special vineyard Israel and Judah. Woe to these because God looked and found bloodshed instead of justice and an outcry instead of righteousness. Woe on those who add house to house and field to field. Woe on those who rise early and stay up late to drink alcohol. Woe to those who draw sin and iniquity after them. Woe to those who call evil good and good evil. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes. Woe to those who take bribes. And all God’s people say, “Amen! You get those wicked people God. We’re surrounded by them and they need to be judged.” We might sit smugly in our pews on Sunday proclaiming our holiness thinking we deserve the presence of God. Or perhaps we are smart enough to know we don’t deserve the presence of God, yet we have convinced ourselves we don’t deserve His absence and judgment either. We aren’t like those wicked people. We go to church. We sing praises. We got baptized. We follow the pattern. When we come into God’s presence we are going to be alright. But then we see Isaiah come into the very presence of God. Faithful prophet Isaiah. Righteous servant Isaiah. Head and shoulders above the rest of Israel Isaiah. And when Isaiah witnesses the glimpse of God’s holiness that God could afford him and still let him live, Isaiah quit crying “Woe are they” and instead cried “Woe is me.” There was no distinction between Isaiah and the rest of Israel and Judah. He knew he deserved every bit of judgment as much as anyone else did. Let us recognize this as well. Too often we sit in our church buildings decrying and

deploring the world for its increasing sinfulness. We smugly think we are okay because we are “at church” and refuse to be tainted by the world’s “major sins” of immorality. But if the holiness of God were to break into this building right now, there would be nothing left for us but to fall on our faces in awed horror at His holiness and our complete lack of it.

- C. See the same kind of response from others. In **Genesis 32:30**, Jacob is so shocked when he realizes he has wrestled with God’s messenger, possibly God Himself, that he names the place Peniel saying in shock, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered” (ESV). When God appeared to Israel at Mount Sinai in the form of smoke and storm, they pled with Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (**Exodus 20:19**, ESV). Of course, they had good reason for this because God had declared that anyone but the authorized few who broke through and got on the mountain would die (**Exodus 19:21**). When Manoah, the father of Samson, realized the angel of God had appeared to him in **Judges 13:22**, he fretted, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God” (ESV). When Ezekiel sees the manifestation of God’s throne room, he falls on his face and it takes the power of the Holy Spirit to lift him back to his feet (**Ezekiel 1:28-2:2**). When God’s messenger appeared to Daniel after three weeks of fasting and prayer, the men around him fled in fear and he was so afraid strength left his body. He fell on his hands and knees trembling and continued trembling when he stood up. The angel had to assure him there was no need to fear (**Daniel 10:7-12**). And consider Peter when Jesus caused the great catch of fish in **Luke 5:4-8**: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (ESV).
- D. And this is why God’s holiness, when we dig deep and grasp it, is so frightening. As **Romans 3:23** declares, we have all sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, that is, the glory of God’s holiness. He is pure and perfect and holy. We are base and vulgar and sinful. God’s holiness demands the death and destruction of sinners. God’s holiness demands our death and destruction. As Joshua told the Israelites, God’s holiness is a frightening thing when we decide to enter a covenant relationship with Him. “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good” (**Joshua 24:19-20**, ESV). Consider also the cry of the men of Beth-shemesh when some of them crossed the boundaries by allowing their vulgar hands to touch and their base eyes to look inside the holy ark of the holy God. God struck a number of them down and the survivors proclaimed: “Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God?” (**I Samuel 6:20**, ESV).
- E. Where does that leave us? We are sinners in the presence of a holy God. We must not let this fact escape us. We must not lose sight of this. All things being equal, rather than gathering here with joy and shouting, singing joyful songs, with smiles and happiness, we should be fleeing for our very lives. We should be on hands and knees trembling in insane fear, bowing and scraping and begging for mercy. How dare we think we have some right, authority, or even permission to come into the presence of God, demanding audience? Isaiah understood that. Do we?
- F. There is part of me that wants to end the lesson here. I fear because we so quickly jump to the next point that we do not allow the force of what we have learned so far in this lesson to impact us as it should. Part of me wants us just to tremble for a week or two at this lesson. I think perhaps we should taste the fear for a time and appreciate the hopelessness of our situation before a holy God. After all, God allowed people to wrestle with this fear for thousands of years before He actually brought hope on to the scene. But, at the same time, I am a gospel preacher. My job is to proclaim the good news, not the bad. I can’t allow you to leave without hearing the good news. I just fear that you won’t grasp how truly good the news is if you haven’t wrestled with how bad the bad news is. But there is good news and Isaiah even experiences it.

IV. The Holy God provides atonement.

- A. In **Isaiah 6:6-7**, God provided atonement for Isaiah. One of the seraphim touches Isaiah’s lips with a burning coal from the altar and declares that atonement has been made. His guilt is taken away. To be honest, I don’t fully grasp the significance of the burning coal. There is probably some imagery or background info that I don’t understand in this situation so I don’t fully grasp how this worked. But what I do know is God’s messenger declared Isaiah guiltless and atoned. When Isaiah declared his unworthiness in the presence of the holy God, God didn’t send him on an endless journey of trying to measure up. He provided atonement.
- B. Brothers, sisters, and friends, you deserve death, as do I. You deserve to be driven from the presence of God into the lake of fire where you will eternally burn and fry in your own fat bemoaning your own unholiness as you rebelled against the standard of our holy God. And there is absolutely nothing you can do to change that. Like Isaiah, we should tremble at our certain demise in the presence of the holy God.

- C. There is good news. Because God is superlatively holy, He is also supremely loving. What we could do nothing about, God has done something about. God has sent a burning coal from His very presence to touch our lips, not only our lips but our hearts and our minds. But this was more than a burning coal from the altar. This was a sacrifice that God placed on the altar for us. It was the sacrifice of His Son, who came into the world, Jesus the Christ. Consider **Romans 5:6-11**. When God sees our sins, His ethical holiness demands death, destruction, and judgment, but His transcendent/majestic holiness loves in a way we cannot. We are shocked that someone so betrayed as God could love us enough to atone for us. Do we truly think God's holy love is so limited that our betrayal would lessen it? God, by His transcendent/majestic, holy love, developed a plan. He offered a sacrifice on our behalf. He offered His Son in order to remove our guilt and set us free from our sins. He brought about reconciliation by His own mighty hand. And notice what this means for us in **Hebrews 10:19-25**. Because of God's love and sacrifice, we can come into His holy places and holy presence by the blood of Jesus Christ. We deserve death in the presence of God, but instead we receive life not because of what we have done for God, but because of what He has done for us. Therefore, the Hebrew writer says, let us hold our confession fast, let us stir one another up to good works (because they now matter), and let us assemble together, encouraging one another and worshiping our God.

Conclusion:

I hope as we conclude, we all understand what an amazing thing is happening as we gather together and worship God. Many of us here should be shouting for joy as we consider the blood of Christ that is allowing us to be here in confidence of faith, glorifying the holy God, and because of what an amazing thing is happening, we should be longing to do this again. But some of us should be absolutely trembling in fear. Some of us should be shaking in our boots because we have not entered this holy place (I am not talking about the church building) by the blood of Christ. Some of us should be falling on our knees proclaiming, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a person of uncleanness." Coming here didn't change that. In fact, no amount of going through religious rites and rituals will change that. Only the promise of God will change that. **Romans 6:1-4** says that those who are baptized into Christ Jesus can rise to walk in new life. In **Acts 2:38**, God promised through Peter that those who repent and are baptized for the remission of sins will receive the gift of the Spirit. You can overcome the fear, if you will simply enter Jesus Christ and receive the promised gift of the Spirit. Accept that promise by repenting and being baptized for the remission of your sins. Why not do that right now?