

Introduction:

I can remember going to church as a young boy. There were times when it was really boring for me – sometimes it was dull and not very interesting. At times I either yawned out loud, poked my friends, made faces at some other kids, or just laughed about something that seemed funny. And you know just how hard it is to stop laughing in church, don't you? I remember a particularly grump elderly couple... whenever we would make a noise they used to turn around to fast and hard and gave us the dirtiest look, like this (demonstrate). I laugh about it now, but there were times when church was a drag to me, and frankly, God seemed boring as well at times. **I think it was CS Lewis** who said, "How little people know who think holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing, it is irresistible."

Once as an experiment, the great scientist Isaac Newton stared at the image of the sun reflected in a mirror. The brightness burned into his retina, and he suffered temporary blindness. Even after he hid for three days behind closed doors, still the bright spot would not fade from his vision.

I pray that you and I would have a similar experience this morning as we fix our gaze on the penetrating purity of God's holiness. May His brightness burn into our lives in such a way that it would never fade from our vision. **As we continue our series, Getting to Know God, today we will discover "Our Holy God"**. May we find His holiness irresistible and never boring. Let's pray.

This message will tie in nicely with the new study we began on Wednesday night, as we looked at the holiness of Daniel and his and his three friend's faithfulness to God. Now, I want to say right at the beginning that just because I am drawn to the topic of God's holiness, that doesn't mean that I am therefore a holy man. In fact, as I have prepared this week I have become aware that the reason I have a deep hunger to learn more of the holiness of God is because I am not holy. I've tasted enough of God's holy majesty to want more.

Read Exodus 15:11. The beauty of the Lord is His majestic holiness. As we approach this topic, let's admit that we don't really understand God's holiness like we should.

In order to help us focus on our holy God, **we're going to camp in Isaiah 6:1-8 READ**. Let me give you some background. Isaiah may have been the greatest prophet in all of Israel. He is called a "major prophet" because of the vast amount of written material that bears his name. He was a statesman, someone who spoke for God to common people and also to kings. He prophesied during the reign of four kings over a period of 60 years, which were filled with crisis and moral decay. In fact, during the time of Isaiah's prophecy the northern kingdom Israel was taken captive by invaders. The southern kingdom, Judah, was attacked by Assyria.

During this time there was a king in Judah named Uzziah. He reigned for a long time – 52 years. He was one of the better kings they ever had. He was able to turn Jerusalem into a fortified city, well equipped with arms for its own military defence, and he gave the people a great sense of security. The story of Uzziah ends on a sad note. While he started out strong, **2 Chronicles 26:16 says that "...after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord, His God and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense."** Because he arrogantly claimed for himself the rights that God had given only to the priests, God struck him with leprosy and he eventually died.

In spite of the shame of his latter years, when King Uzziah died, it became a time of national mourning. In the same year that his king died, Isaiah went to the temple presumably to find some consolation and to pay his respects to Uzziah. He got more than he bargained for. We can summarize Isaiah's experience this way: (1) He saw the Lord's Majesty (6:1-4), (2) He saw the Lord's Mercy (6:5-7), (3) He saw the Lord's Mission (6:8).

1. SEE THE LORD'S MAJESTY

The first thing Isaiah saw was the Lord's majesty. **READ verse 6:1.** Let's stop right there. **"I saw the Lord."** What an incredible statement! Think about the situation. You'll notice the word "Lord" is the word Adonai, which has reference to His absolute sovereignty as King of Kings.

With that in mind, it's easier to understand **verse 1**: In the year that we lost our human king, I saw the real King." There's no reason to panic when God is on the throne. It may have looked to Isaiah as if everything was falling apart but the Sovereign One was holding everything together. His kingship is infinitely superior to that of Uzziah or anyone else. In the midst of this chaotic time, God makes a personal appearance. And Isaiah sees Him sitting upon a throne. This is a picture of His majesty and His exaltation, His glory and His power. As Isaiah sees the Lord's majesty, He learns three important lessons:

Lesson #1 is that God is high

Imagine if you will what it must have been like for him to see the Lord high and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. I love watching brides come down the wedding aisle, and the train of their dress flows behind them as they walk. Now, try to picture what Isaiah saw. The train of God's robe filled every part of the temple! It was over the chairs, the podium, the balcony, over everything, everywhere. Isaiah is overwhelmed with everything, and as he looks up, way up, he sees the Sovereign God seated on a throne high and exalted. Can you imagine what must have been going through his mind?

Lesson #2 is that God is holy

Isaiah describes what he saw in **verse 2**. Now what are seraphim? The word literally means "fiery ones" and Isaiah describes them as a group of fiery angels who surround God as He sits upon His exalted throne and worship Him continually. Their personal calling was to attend to God's holiness. Have you ever wondered why they have six wings? Notice it says that with two, they were flying. Apparently these marvellous, incredible, supernatural creatures had the capacity to hover like some kind of a celestial helicopter around the throne of God which was high and lifted up.

And then it says, "With two they covered their feet." Why? Do you remember when Moses was up on the old dirt hill one day? He turned around and saw a burning bush and a voice came to him out of the bush that said, "take off your shoes, Moses." Why? "Because you're standing on holy ground." This was holy ground not because of anything virtuous in the ground, but because God was there! His pervasive presence was what sanctified the earth under his feet, and so the angels covered their feet whilst flying. The ground wasn't holy in heaven, the whole place was holy because God was there!

Then it says they had two wings to cover their face. That's a little easier to understand. If they hover around the throne of God, they're exposed to His full glory. You remember in the book of Exodus that God says to Moses, "You're going to be My man, go lead My people." And Moses says, "I'm not going to do it alone. Who's going to go with me?" And God says, "My presence will go with you, I'll go with you." To which Moses said, "That's a nice promise, God, but I'd like some proof. I mean, I appreciate that but would you prove it by showing me your glory?" God answers in **Exodus 33:20, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."** No creature could withstand the sight of the blazing fullness of the glory of God. God promises close proximity but never full revelation. So He says to Moses, "I'll tell you what, **"I'll tuck you in the cleft of a rock** and I'll let you see my back." I like to think of it as afterglow. You can't see the whole deal, but I'll let you see my afterglow. I think that's why the angels covered their faces. I don't think they could have existed in the full display of the glory of the holiness of God.

But the most incredible thing about them is not their appearance but their message. It's what they cried out in **verse 3**, **"And they were calling to one another..."** They had this continuous thing going on, back and forth, **"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of His glory."** Why holy, holy, holy? Is it just because that's the way the song is written? No. The song came later. **Why say it in triplicate?** When we want to emphasize the importance of something in English, we underline words or use italics, or use boldface or capital letter – or all of these devices at the same time. We may then follow it with an exclamation point or two. When the angels say, "holy, holy, holy," they are emphasizing the breathtaking splendour of God's holiness!

By the way, do you know that this is the only attribute of God in all of Scripture that is **repeated three times?** Never does the Bible say God is love, love, love. Nor does it say that God is light, light, light.... Truth, truth, truth.... Mercy, mercy, mercy... wrath, wrath, wrath. But it does say that He's **holy, holy, holy**. I believe that this is also just one of many references to the trinity God-head – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To "be holy" means to be separate. The very god-ness of God means that He is separate from all that is not God. There is an infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature. Folks, we don't have a clear understanding of God's holiness which is the reason for our shallowness, our inability, our selfishness, our weakness, and our disobedience. Remember, as we established last week in our message, Our Knowable God, what we think about God is the most important thing about us.

One day the disciples came up to Jesus and said, **"Teach us to pray."** Jesus answered by saying "Here's how to pray. Our Father who art in heaven **hallowed** by Thy name." You know what the word hallowed means? Holy. If you are serious about prayer, then you must begin with a recognition of the holiness of God. A theologian called RC Sproul said that, **"Any attempt to understand** God apart from His holiness is idolatry." This is affirmed in the Ten Commandments where we are to have no other gods before us and under no circumstances are we ever to use the name of the Lord God in vain. He is holy, holy, holy.

Lesson #3 is that God is here.

And now I want you to notice the last phrase of **verse 3: "...the whole earth is full of His glory."** This is a third lesson Isaiah learned.... God is high, and God is holy, **and GOD IS HERE**. This is a concept that is difficult for us to understand. How can He be both holy and be here? How can He be high and lifted up and still be right here with us? Theologians refer to this as His *transcendence* – He is separate and independent from us, and He is *immanent* – He is right here with us. He is to be feared and He is our friend.

Now let's see what else Isaiah experienced in **verse 4: "At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."** Now this is getting pretty dramatic. The place begins to shake. It's like an erupting volcano. The foundations of the temple begin to move and the smoke indicates that **he is in the fiery presence of God**. In other words, we begin to see a holy God of judgement. This is a manifestation of His tremendous majestic holiness. As **Hebrews 12:29** says, **"God is a consuming fire"** and you can't toy around with Him or you'll be vapourised.

2. SEE THE LORD'S MERCY

And so, Isaiah is called to see the Lord's majesty in verses 1-4. Now, in verses 5-7, he sees the Lord's mercy. What was Isaiah's reaction when he came face-to-face with God's majesty? Look at the first part of **verse 5, "Woe to me!"** I cried..." That's not just a sigh of despair, although I think there's despair in it. It's far more than that.

You see, in the Old Testament prophets gave prophetic announcements, which were very often preceded by the statement, "Thus saith the Lord." And their statements could be positive or negative.

When they were positive they'd often say, "Blessed." When they were negative, they would often say, "woe." On the lips of a prophet, the word woe is an announcement of doom. Jeremiah used it. Ezekiel used it. Nahum used it. Amos used it. Habakkuk used it. Hosea used it. Zephaniah used it. Zechariah used it. Micah used it. Jesus used it in Matthew 24 when he said, "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees." And the angels of judgement in Revelation use it. It is a word of bringing down a curse.

And here is an amazing thing – a prophet of God pronounces a curse and the judgement of God upon himself! This is mind-boggling. Isaiah is the best man in the land (in a sense). He is a sold-out servant of God. But when he sees the holiness of God, the only thing he can do is pronounce a curse upon his own head. He can only see his defilement, not his goodness. Before he could see the mercy of God, Isaiah first needed to understand his own destiny and depravity.

And then he says this, "I am ruined" which means to be lost, or to be annihilated, or to be destroyed. He was devastated by the holiness of God. He's wiped out. He's falling apart. He's coming loose at the seams. What Isaiah was expressing is what modern psychologists describe as the experience of personal disintegration. Why? Because he saw God and when he saw God for the first time in his life... he then saw himself and now he knew how wretched he really was. He may have been a secure fellow before this. Everybody honoured him and patted him on the back. He was the image of virtue. He was the best of men, a spiritual leader, the voice of God, and obedient saint, a servant of the Lord. And yet, with one glimpse of God's holiness, the man was a wretch in his own eyes.

John Calvin once said, "*Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance until they have confronted themselves with the majesty of God.*"

As long as Isaiah could compare himself with other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was morally and spiritually annihilated as he came face-to-face with his own depravity.

The most important instrument of a prophet was his mouth. Seeing his own polluted situation, Isaiah cries out, "I am a man of unclean lips." You know what that means? I have a dirty mouth. Me, the prophet of God who should open my mouth to speak of God, I've got a dirty mouth and I dwell in the midst of a people who have dirty mouths.

Friends, no one can stand in the presence of God without becoming profoundly and devastatingly aware of his own wretched sinfulness. In other words, if we don't understand the holiness of God, we don't understand our own destiny nor depravity. To see even the smallest glimpse of God's holiness is to be destroyed and wiped out. Isaiah would never be the same again. And you know what? Neither will we when we see God's holiness.

No one ever comes before the holiness of God without some form of devastation. The prophet Habakkuk learned this the hard way. After approaching God rather boldly and demanding an answer to some of his questions, Habakkuk 3:16 records what happens when God finally answers him: "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled..." Friends, when is the last time you trembled and your heart pounded in the presence of God? After coming to grips with our depravity, we are then ready to understand our deliverance.

Look at verse 6 and notice what happens at the very moment that Isaiah realised his sin – “then...” Deliverance is set in motion at the exact time that Isaiah recognised his depravity. **“Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.”** Now watch this in **verse 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.’** God does not leave Isaiah devastated - He does something about it.

This hot coal was not taken from the altar of incense, but from the brazen altar in the temple courtyard, where the sacrifices were offered. This foresees the deliverance that the final sacrifice, the Lamb of God, made as He laid down His life for us. Isaiah heard the praise of the seraphim and their thunderous song, which shook the very foundation of the Temple. But what did God hear? He heard the faint, fearful cry of a guilty man who understands his destiny and his depravity and is now broken and contrite. When God hears Isaiah, he tells a seraph to stop worshipping for a while so that he can go and minister to a needy heart.

You know what it takes to get to that point where your guilt is taken away and your sins atoned for? It takes a broken and a contrite heart in the face of the holiness of God. As Psalm 51:7 reminds us, **“A broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”** No cheap grace here, folks. No easy believism. This was severe mercy ignited by God’s holy fire. There is pain involved in true redemption. True salvation is always painful because it involves wrestling about who will ultimately be in control of our lives. Friends, do you see how our guilt is taken away at the cross? Our sins, which emit a foul smell before a holy God, are cleansed and purified.

ILLUSTRATION: *This reminds me of the husband who gave his wife a beautiful skunk coat one Christmas. When she opened the package, she exclaimed, “I don’t understand how such a nice coat could come from such a foul smelling creature.” To which the husband replied, “Hey, I don’t ask for much, but you could at least show me some respect!”*

Friends, if we’ve put our faith in Jesus Christ, we’re all like skunks who no longer stink. God has delivered us through the Cross. Our sin smell has been taken away. Or as God said earlier to the prophet in **Isaiah 1:18, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”**

3. SEE THE LORD’S MISSION

Isaiah first saw the Lord’s majesty. Then, as he was overcome with the foul odour of his own sinfulness, he experienced the Lord’s mercy. **Now, in verse 8, he sees the Lord’s mission.**

Let’s read verse 8. In seeing the Lord’s mission, Isaiah is first sensitive to His voice – **“I heard the voice of the Lord...”** Up to this point he had seen the glory of God, he had heard the song of the seraphim, he had felt the burning coal upon his lips. Now for the first time he heard the voice of God. Suddenly the angels were silent, and the voice that boomed through the temple echoed with some piercing questions.

By the way, did you notice the word, “us” in verse 8? God is asking a question: **“Who will go for us?”** The Hebrew is in the plural here, giving us some Old Testament evidence for the existence of the Trinity. There is plurality in the Godhead.

Next, after being sensitive to the voice of God, Isaiah surrenders to God’s call. Notice Isaiah’s answer – **“Here am I. Send me.”** There’s a big difference between saying, “Here am I” and saying, “Here I am.” Had he said, “Here I am,” that would have merely indicated his location. Instead, he said, “Here am I.” With these words, Isaiah is surrendering to God’s mission, he’s stepping forward to volunteer for service.

CONCLUSION

That leads to a couple of obvious questions. Are you sensitive to His voice this morning? And have you surrendered to His call? God is still looking for people who have been so moved by His majesty, and have experienced His mercy on a personal basis, that they will be eager to join in his mission.

In the first part of verse 9, God says "Go..." God is eager to have us go into our mission fields. Your mission field may be on a broad scale and might mean going to another country. Your mission field might be somewhere inter-state in Australia. Or it might be your workplace, your school. For some, your mission field might even be your very own household.

Are you sensitive to His voice this morning? Are you surrendered to His mission? I don't know what exactly that will mean for you personally, but I do know that we've been given a task to do – to go and make disciples of all nations. **It was DL Moody who said,** *"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything but I can do something. And that which I can do by the grace of God, I will do."*

You see, our mission must flow out of our understanding of God's majesty and our personal experience with God's mercy. Let me give you one final exhortation this morning. Do not go if you have had no vision of the majesty and greatness of God. Do not go if you have never realised your own smelly depravity. Do not go if you have not experienced His mercy and restoring grace. You may need to spend some time on your knees in front of our holy God. If you don't, you will have nothing to say.

LET'S PRAY.