

The Holiness Of God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you've got your Bibles open or it will also appear on the screen, if you could turn to Isaiah chapter 6 verses 1 to 7.

Isaiah 6, 1 to 7. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon his throne, high and lifted up, and a train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings, with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to the other and said, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory, and the foundations of the thresholds shook, and the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said, 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.

And 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 is touched your lips.

[1 : 2 3] Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. Well, this evening, as I said, we're going to spend our time thinking about looking at the holiness of God.

And it's a truth that is found throughout the Bible. There are lots of passages we could turn to. We read one of them at first in Revelation chapter four. But we're going to spend our time in Isaiah six, verses one to seven, that we just read.

It's one of these mountaintop passages of the Bible. You sometimes get passages in the Bible that are just so majestic, that speak so clearly about who God is. And I think this one, this chapter is one such passage about the holiness of God.

You might be wondering, though, why are we looking at that topic tonight? Why are we thinking about this evening about the holiness of God? And so let me just answer that question, even just briefly, by way of introduction.

Why should we study the holiness of God? Well, three reasons. First of all, it's at the heart of understanding who God is. Second, it's at the heart of understanding who we are as people or who humanity is.

[2 : 3 0] And third, it's at the heart of understanding the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's throughout the Bible. Those are big topics. Who is God?

Who we are? Why did Jesus come? The holiness of God is right at the center of them. It's the fulcrum of all these things. And I want to argue that you can't understand or even begin to understand these topics unless we first have some understanding, some appreciation of the holiness of God.

And if those topics sound maybe a bit distant and dry, then let me put them in a bit in a different way. Do you want to understand what the Christian God is like if you're maybe thinking about things for the first time?

You need to understand the holiness of God. Or maybe you're a Christian. Do you want to know your God more? Well, you need to understand the holiness of God.

Maybe you're trying to make sense of this messy and broken world. Why is it the way it is? Maybe you're wondering what God's will, what his plan is in your life. What does God want your life to be like?

[3 : 31] Or maybe you're wondering why Jesus had to die. All these things are connected like strings, like the threads in a spider's web to the holiness of God.

It's an incredibly relevant topic then for every single one of us. Over the next half hour, I hope we can trace all these veins, trace these lines back to the beating heart of God's holiness and see its importance.

Isaiah sees God. He sees the angels crying out to God, the God who is holy, holy, holy. So I thought it was only appropriate that maybe we looked at the holiness of God under three headings.

Holy, holy, holy. Holy what God is. Holy what we are not. And third, holy what Christ makes us.

So first of all, holy what God is, or perhaps I should be saying holy who God is. Because God isn't an inanimate object, is he? We could say the stone is rough, but God isn't holy the way a stone is rough.

[4 : 34] God is personal. He is relational. And his holiness isn't just describing an external characteristic like the woman is blonde or the man is tall.

Holiness takes us to the depth of God's character. It's who he is. It's the Godness of God. If God's not holy, I'd argue he's not God. What does it mean to be holy?

Let's look at verses one to four in Isaiah. Let's see what Isaiah the prophet sees when he looks and he has this vision. Let me read verses one to four again. In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew, and one called to the other and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. Well that first line, the year the King Uzziah died, gives us the date of Isaiah's call to be a prophet.

[5 : 38] The first five chapters of Isaiah kind of give the context of Isaiah's ministry and then he flashes back in chapter six and tells us what started it all. But it doesn't just tell us the date of Isaiah's call to be a prophet, it also gives us the backdrop for this whole vision when Isaiah sees God the king.

We're meant to really compare and contrast. It's the year King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the real king. Now King Uzziah was the king of Judah, which is the southern kingdom of Jerusalem.

So the nation of Israel at around 1000 BC split in two and the southern kingdom was Judah. And two chronicles 26 tells us that overall Uzziah was a pretty good king and God blessed him and the nations.

You can imagine it was quite a shock to the system when he died, as it is when any monarch dies. But in the midst of that turmoil, Isaiah sees the God who is living, who is eternal, who is unfazed, untouched by death.

Not only that, but God is the God who is high and lifted up. There's a big theme in Isaiah of the proud being brought low and humbled, while God is the one who is lifted up.

[6 : 55] It's that creator creature distinction. God is not on our level. He is God, we are not. You see, while Uzziah was good overall, his reign ended in tragedy.

I'd encourage you if you had your own time later on maybe to read two chronicles 26. Because you read that the rise and fall of King Uzziah, he started well, but then we're told he grew proud to his destruction.

For he was unfaithful to the Lord his God and he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense. Now that might not mean much to us, but only priests were allowed to go into the temple and burn incense on the altar.

And so when Uzziah went in, God punished him. He, Uzziah couldn't come in a holy temple because he wasn't holy. And Uzziah had, and God punished him by making leprosy break out on his skin.

And Uzziah died a leper exiled from God. Uzziah died in disgrace, but in contrast, Isaiah sees the God who reigns in glory, who's far more majestic and glorious than we can ever wrap our heads around.

[8 : 01] Isaiah sees, Isaiah just sees, doesn't even see God. He just sees a corner of his robe. We read the train of God's robe fill the temple, literally the hem of God's robe. You know, just that little bit of stitching out the bottom.

God is so glorious and majestic. Uzziah just gets a glimpse of that hem of the robe. That's enough to fill the whole temple. And Uzziah is absolutely stunned at the holiness of God.

The temple cannot contain God's glory. Neither can the whole earth because in verse three, the angels cry, the whole earth is full of God's glory. And in fact, you might say the angels cry in verse three gives us the summary explanation of Isaiah's vision.

Why is it such a big deal? Why is it such a big deal that God is high and lifted up, that he is the one who is living, that the train whose robe fills the temple? Well, it's because God is the holy God.

They call to one another saying, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The living God, the exalted God, the reigning God is the God who is holy.

[9 : 05] And you might, some people have defined holiness as the sum of all moral excellency, the antithesis or the opposite of all moral blemish and defilement.

In other words, there's two sides to the coin to understanding holiness. On one hand, God's holiness tells us that all his attributes, all his characteristics are perfect.

So when God tells us that he is compassionate, we shouldn't be thinking in terms of you or how you and I are compassionate, because God's holiness means that his compassion is without limits, that there's no one beyond the care and pity of God.

And when the Bible tells us that God is love, I mean, is that his love isn't fickle like ours? It's constant. It's steadfast.

And that word actually is so often put with love in the Old Testament. God's steadfast love is how it's so often translated in our Bible, because God's love is not like ours.

[10 : 08] It's constant. It's faithful. It's steadfast. God's holiness tells us that all of his attributes are next level, not sex level, but they're nothing like ours.

The flip side, of course, is that no part of God's character then is flawed. His justice is never corrupt. His power is never abused. God's character is in a league of its own.

His, the greatest acts of mercy, of love, of justice that we can think of, of people that we admire are nothing compared to God's love and his mercy and his care and justice, all these things.

All the, when we see great acts of mercy, of love, all those things are inevitably tarnished. They're inevitably contaminated by pride, by selfishness, whether in motive or in whatever.

None of us has ever perfectly loved, perfectly, has perfectly just any of those things. But God is holy.

[11 : 14] He's in a class of his own, completely uncontaminated. No compromise there. And the utter purity of God means that the angels attending him can't even look at him.

They can't even, they're not even allowed to look at him. I remember with theologian, Arcee Sproel memorably explaining the wonder of this. He said that all creatures are created by God for the environment they'll inhabit.

So you might say the clownfish is perfectly adapted to, or created to live in an anemone. Do I say that right, an anemone? Because while that will sting most other animals, the clownfish doesn't get stung by the anemone.

Or apparently there's a fish called a not athenoid fish that lives in the freezing arctic oceans. It's got a sort of anti-freeze in its blood. That means that it can live at such low temperatures.

Well God created the seraphim, these angels that stand in his presence. In order to be perfectly able to suit their task.

[12 : 17] And well by giving them three pairs of wings, two to cover their eyes so they can't look upon God. Two to cover their bodies for even these flaming sinless creatures can't stand in the presence of a holy God.

And two wings to do his bidding. God is too holy even for the angels to just say it once. The angels repeat three times, holy, holy, holy.

It's not because they're stuttering or because they don't know any other word to describe God. Rather, Hebrew uses repetition in order to show us, to emphasize and to show the superlative.

So like we might say good, better, best. In Hebrew they would say holy, holy, holy, and holy, holy, holy kind of thing. So holy, holy, holy is the way the Hebrew is saying this is as holy as you can get.

In a whole different class of holy if that's even possible. Just to give you an example of that, in Genesis 14 there's a line that says the plane was full of pits. And that's literally pits, pits in Hebrew.

[13 : 26] Or in 2 Kings 25, solid gold is literally gold, gold. So in the same way God is holy, holy, holy, he's supremely holy, he's fully holy, he's more holy than there's really words to explain.

And the holiness of God is the only instance in the Old Testament where one characteristic of God is repeated three times for emphasis. It's the only attribute of God that's elevated to this third degree.

God is never called, you might be interested to know, God's never called love, love, love, or just, just, just, even though those things are true. It's God's holiness that is specially emphasized in this way.

God's holiness you might say then, it's his most important attribute. Not because it's in competition with his other attributes, but because the perfection and uniqueness of God's other attributes can only be understood through the lens of his holiness.

If I told you God was full of love, you could be mistaken but just think it's a bigger kind of love of the love that we have or we show. God's holiness reminds us it's on a different planet.

[14 : 38] So God's holiness is his highest attribute. The question is, do we share the Bible's emphasis? When we think about God, when we read about God, do we see God in the same way that Isaiah saw him?

Do you remember that he is a holy God, first and foremost, that he is holy? You see, God deserves our worship for his love and his mercy and his justice.

However, if we emphasize some of God's attributes in a way the Bible doesn't, if we have a wonky view of God because we just think of God as, oh, we just only emphasize that God is love, or only emphasize that God is just.

We're creating a God really after our imagination and not after what the Bible tells us. We aren't worshiping the God of the Bible then in that sense.

Understanding the holiness of God helps us to have a fully-orbed, accurate picture, as accurate as we can, as you might say, of the God who reveals himself to us in Scripture.

[15 : 42] So we need to remember, we need to see that God is holy in order to see him as he truly is. And only that though, we need to remember God is holy to see ourselves as we truly are.

We're on our second point now, holy what we are not. From verse 3 again, the angels say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.

And the foundations of the thresholds at the voice of him who called, sorry, shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And Isaiah says, woe is me for I am lost, for I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of the people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

God is holy. The problem is that by nature we are not. When Isaiah comes face to face with a holy God, he sees himself.

Truly, he sees himself for the first time for what he really is. He says, woe is me. And if you are reading through Isaiah, I encourage you to do that.

[16 : 50] You'd recognize that phrase, that woe phrase comes up again and again because Isaiah pronounces God's judgment against the evil of Israel. Let me just read you a few ways, times that comes up.

Isaiah says, woe to those who call evil good and good evil who put darkness for light and light for darkness. In chapter 10 he says, woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees and the writers who keep writing oppression to turn aside the needy from justice, to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoils, how they make the fatherless their prey.

What will you do on the day of punishment in that ruin that will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help and where will you leave your wealth? Isaiah pronounces all these woes, this judgment on people who have turned away from God, who have turned into oppressive idolatrous and rebellious nation.

And it would be easy to read through Isaiah and maybe think, Isaiah was a bit judgmental. Isaiah kind of walked around Israel looking down from his high horse and pointing his finger at all these other people, pronouncing woes upon them.

But we'd be mistaken if we thought that. Because the first woe that Isaiah pronounces is on himself. The very first woe of Isaiah's ministry is woe is me.

[18 : 17] As an aside, can I say that becoming a Christian isn't about being better than others or pronouncing judgment on them, it begins with recognizing that we deserve God's judgment.

Woe is me. And being a mature Christian isn't about looking around at the world, at society and moaning about all the sin that's around us and moaning about all the problems that are around us.

Rather, it's about moaning about the sin that's within us and having a deeper and deeper recognition of all that we are by nature. As Isaiah says, woe is me.

Well, why? Because Isaiah realizes that while God is holy, he is not. He's unclean, he says. God is holy because he's perfect in every way, untouched, uncontaminated by sin.

Unclean is the opposite. Stained by sin. Inside and out, like a bottle of spilt ink. Everywhere is just stained. As Isaiah says, woe is me, for I am lost.

[19 : 21] I'm a man of unclean lips. I dwell in the midst of the people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts. When Isaiah glimpses the glory of God, when he glimpses the holy God, he realizes that he's not pure like the seraphim.

That he's dirty like everyone else in his generation. And that includes us. We're all unclean by nature. We're all contaminated by sin.

Now, I suspect though that most people don't see themselves that way. And even those of us who are trusting in Jesus, it's easy to forget that that is what we were like before Jesus saved us.

You see, if I went into town and I had two jars and I labeled them good and bad, it's a bit easier than label them holy and unclean. And people put a token in, in each one that they thought best applied to them.

I suspect the good jar would fill up a lot quicker than the bad jar. Because most people think, most of us think that we're basically good, don't we? And that's because when we think about good and bad, when we think about holy and unclean, we normally compare ourselves to one another.

[20 : 30] We think about all the bad people in the world, all the people we think are worse. We think about maybe the neighbor that we always hear arguing and shouting at their spouse or we think about all the things that we haven't been doing, all the things that we've been thinking, well, I could have said that.

I'm not as bad as I could be. And we think, well, okay, I'm above average. I'd call myself basically good person. And that's because we conclude we're pretty good because we're comparing ourselves to others.

The problem is that we're using the wrong background. You see, I've got a white shirt, this one actually, that I really like. The problem is that my wife one day put a yellow duster in the wash.

See, I was originally jotted this note down and saying, I put it in the wash. And my wife said, no, no, no, it was me who put it. You can't say that you did it. And I was just trying to save her by saying this in front of all of you. But anyway, she put the yellow duster in the wash and all of the white clothes, including this shirt, came out with a little tinge of yellow.

And I really like this shirt, so I still wear it. And I've been assured by people that it doesn't really look that yellow. You can't really tell there's a tinge of yellow and you can't. And that's because I've got a blue jacket on.

[21 : 45] But if you see this shirt on the rack with my other shirts that are white, or have various white patterns, you'll notice. You'll notice that there's a yellow tinge. You'll see it for what it really is.

And brothers and sisters, we hold up our lives against the background of a broken and sinful world. It's easy to tell ourselves that we're clean. That we're pretty pure.

However, it's only when we stand before a holy God that we realize how unclean we really are. It's not just about stained yellow. It's the contrast is like black on white.

God's holiness exposes our uncleanness. And like Isaiah, that should make us terrified. Because the consequence Isaiah says is woe is me for I'm lost.

I'm doomed. Because unclean people can't stand before a holy God. We can't cover ourselves up and hide like the seraphim.

[22 : 47] Before the living God, God is the God who sees our hearts. Our minds, our lives are all exposed. He sees right through us. He sees all our selfish motives, our secret thoughts, our hidden thoughts, our impatient words.

He knows the darkest secrets of our hearts, the things we're most ashamed of, that we wish we'd never thought, that we would never speak in public. He knows it all. And before his holiness, all of our good works, the best of what we have to offer in reality are just like filthy rags.

You see, unclean people can't stand in the presence of a holy God. Any more than King Uzziah, the leper could come into the temple. You see, King Uzziah thought he was holy enough to offer sacrifice in the temple.

He forgot who he was. And God caused that leprosy to break out on his body to remind him just how unclean, just how holy he was compared to a holy God that he couldn't stand at the same level.

Let me ask you, do you stand before God like Uzziah in pride thinking or assuming that you're holy enough to stand in God's presence on your own steam?

[24 : 02] Or have you joined Uzziah to see what you're really like, to see what we're really like? It's all of us. Me included that before the holy God, the one who was holy, holy, holy, we have to admit, woe is me.

God is holy, we are not. Then what hope then do we have? Uzziah clearly thought there was no hope for him. He said, woe is me. He thought that was done. As I thought, I've seen God.

This is the end of my life. I can't don't stand a chance, but God wasn't finished with him. Was he? On our third point now, holy, what Christ makes us.

Let me read verse six. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning cold 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 six takes us to the very heart of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, because here we have God's gracious cross of Christ foreshadowed.

[25 : 06] Let me explain what I mean. Unclean Isaiah gets cleansed. It doesn't he? How? With a sacrifice. Remember the setting of Isaiah's vision is takes place in the temple.

That's where Isaiah gets a glimpse of God and when the angel takes a burning coal from the altar, he's taking it from the altar that would have had sacrifice animals sacrificed on it to pay for sin.

And touched by the white coal, we'd expect Isaiah's lips to blister and bleed and burst to destroy.

But instead that coal heals. It doesn't I destroy Isaiah because that fire has already been spent on the sacrifice. Isaiah is cleansed in the presence of a holy God.

He should have been destroyed, but you might say the sacrifice was already destroyed by that heat. Isaiah had a unique commission, but he included this included chapter six for a reason to tell us that there is hope for unclean sinners like you and me in the presence of a holy God.

[26 : 17] What Isaiah's vision foreshadowed Jesus's death on the cross fulfilled Jesus, who is fully God and fully man who is holy, holy, holy and yet on the cross.

When Jesus was nailed to a cross, he became unclean. But he took upon himself the sin of all who were trust in him. He took the punishment. He bore the wrath of God for all of that sin that we deserve wise so that we might be healed.

So that we might be cleansed so that our guilt might be taken away. Our sin atone for when that burning coal touched Isaiah's lips.

Everything changed. Everything changed. How do we know? Because two verses later, we didn't read this bit. But if you go to verse eight, the next thing that happens, Isaiah says, I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send and who will go for us?

And Isaiah said, here I am, send me. And then he that is God said, go. What's the next thing that happens? God has a conversation with Isaiah.

[27 : 22] That's right. The God who is holy, holy, holy is now talking to the man who completely despaired of his life one minute ago because a coal touched his lips and changed that because Isaiah was cleansed and he can suddenly suddenly stand before a holy God.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus's death does that. Jesus's death is that fulfillment of that burning coal. By nature, we are we're cut off from God.

We're unclean. Jesus's death is described as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Atonement is at one month. It makes us at one with God.

It reconciles. It brings us back into relationship with God. Just like Isaiah suddenly was at the point where he could talk to the holy God. So Jesus's death brings us back into relationship with a holy God.

And that restoration, you can might say has three stages. The rest of the restoration begins with our status. Whoever trusts in Jesus is not just clean, but is holy in God's sight.

[28 : 27] In Hebrews 10 verse 10, we read that we have speaking of those who trust in Jesus. We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

So what I was saying earlier on about that we are unclean in the presence of God. If we have trusted in Jesus, that's no longer our status. We are holy in the presence of a holy God because Jesus has made us holy, holy in status, but also holy in purpose.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he says God chose us in Jesus before the foundation of the world that we might be holy and blameless in him. God, we are made holy and we are made to be holy.

That's our purpose, our new life. That's what we are created for. Like the seraphim, we were originally created, designed to stand in the presence of God. Sin has caused us to be exiled from God to have that relationship shattered and us thrown out of God's presence.

Jesus died and again, and rose again to restore our status, to restore our purpose, to make us once more a holy people for a holy purpose.

[29 : 40] And you don't have to be a long round church though for long to realize that this is still a, every church is a group of people who still sin.

Who may be holy in status and in purpose, but maybe not in action. That's because we're still a work in progress. You might say that we're like beggars who have been adopted by the king.

We suddenly have that status of being, of prince or princess, of royalty, but we still need to learn to live like royalty. We still need to be changed to live like royalty. And that's why Jesus sends his spirit into the hearts of his people to transform them, to live holy lives.

In summary, you might say that burning coal of Jesus' death makes us holy in status, holy in purpose, holy in life. Paul, Paul's in, in chapter five of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, that summarized really nicely.

Paul says, Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her. In other words, holify her, make her holy. Then cleanse her by the washing of water and the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy without blemish.

[30 : 57] That's why Jesus died to make us holy, to present us as holy as a church, as individuals.

Jesus saved us to be holy in every sense of the word. And I don't know about you, but studying Isaiah six has made me appreciate that on a whole different level. The God who is holy, holy, holy, the God before whom angels hide their faces, that God is saying of those who trust in Jesus of believers, I'm going to make you like me.

I'm going to restore you as image bearers to be holy like the holy God. What a privilege that the holy God would restore us to be holy like him.

That's not something we blow our trumpet and act really proud about because it's all God's doing. He put holes out that burning coal. He cleanses us.

Nothing of our doing. He transforms us. He gives us that new status and purpose in life. Time's running out. So I want to close by returning to the question why study holiness?

[32 : 06] Why does it matter that God is holy? Well, let me just answer that with the negative by saying that if we don't have the holiness of God, we lose the gospel.

If God isn't holy, if his attributes aren't perfect and if they're instead contaminated like us, then God is no different to any kind of creation of man.

He's no different to any figment of our imagination, any God that we create, and he's certainly no God worthy of worship. If God is not holy, then he's not worthy of worship.

If God is not holy, then our sin can't be that serious because if God's contaminated, then what's the big deal if we are too? In fact, could you even define right or right and wrong if you don't have God as that brilliant white background against which we compare everything?

We certainly wouldn't be separated from God because of sin if God wasn't holy. God if God wasn't holy, he wouldn't be worthy of worship. Sin wouldn't be a problem. If God wasn't holy, Jesus wouldn't need to die.

[33 : 16] Jesus needs to die because sin separates us from God. If God isn't holy, then sin doesn't separate us from God. But that would also mean that there's no hope.

If God is not holy, then this is all there is, this world with all its muck and mess. There's nothing better that it should be. Our purpose is nothing more than to just exist, to continue.

Brosnan sisters, the holiness of God may be sobering news for sinners. It really exposes and shows us who we really are. But it's also good news of great joy for all people.

For in Jesus Christ, the God who is holy, holy, holy, he takes our uncleanness. He died to take our uncleanness so that we might be restored to him.

So that we might be a holy people with a holy purpose and a hope for eternity. Let's pray.