

THE HOLINESS OF GOD
ISAIAH 6:1-8



Early in his ministry, Donald Grey Barnhouse, the famed preacher of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, was invited to preach at Princeton Theological Seminary, the school from which he'd graduated a few years earlier. One of the school's most prominent professors, Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, was in the front row while Barnhouse nervously preached — he was somewhat intimidated by this mentor.

After the service, Wilson shook Barnhouse's hand and declared, "If you come back again, I will not come to hear you preach." Barnhouse was understandably crushed. So he timidly asked Wilson, "Where did I fail?"

"Fail?" Wilson replied. "Oh, you didn't fail. I only come to hear a former student once. I only want to know if he is a big-Godder or a little-Godder, and then I know how his ministry will be. Some men have a little God, and they are always in trouble with Him...He doesn't intervene on behalf of His people. They have a little God and I call them little-Godders. There are others who have a great God. He speaks, and it is done. He commands, and it stands fast. He knows how to show Himself strong on behalf of them that fear Him. You are a big-Godder, and He will bless your ministry." [Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 75-6.]

In contrast, by-and-large, most people have a little God and are unafraid of God. Specifically, they are not afraid of His wrath — either his temporal or eternal judgment. I've had more than one conversation when someone said to me after I questioned them about his sin, "I guess God will just have to send me to Hell," as if he was being sent to jail for a three-day weekend — a mild inconvenience on his schedule.

We are not afraid of Him and His wrath because we are content with our own standard of righteousness and we are ignorant of His possession of infinite holiness. In other words, we are big and He is small.

This was the precarious position of the nation of Israel. In the year 740 B.C., Assyria was beginning to pressure the nation, and it would result in the 10 Northern tribes being taken into captivity some 20 years later. Isaiah was writing and speaking to awaken the nation from their spiritual slumber and coldness to God. They were facing condemnation for their sinful rebellion (1:4, 9; 2:5-6; 5:7, 20-23). What they needed was a clear vision of God that Isaiah himself was graced to experience in his famous vision in chapter 6. As we have been thinking about our calling to holiness and sanctification in Romans 13, it seems to me that we also will benefit from a clear reminder of God's holiness as a stimulant to our own holiness:

THE MAN OF GOD MUST HAVE A GOD-SIZED UNDERSTANDING OF AND DEVOTION TO GOD'S HOLINESS.

How do we grow in holiness? This passage provides **four perspectives** of holiness that serve to transform us.

1. **A Vision of God's HOLINESS (vv. 1-4)** — what is His holiness like?
2. **A Perspective of Our UNHOLINESS (v. 5)** — how unholy are we?
3. **A Provision of CHRIST'S Atonement (vv. 6-7)** — what has He done for us?
4. **An Obedience to God's CALL (v. 8)** — what shall we do?

THE MAN OF GOD MUST HAVE A GOD-SIZED UNDERSTANDING OF AND DEVOTION TO GOD'S HOLINESS.

1. A Vision of God's HOLINESS (vv. 1-4) — what is God like?

- There is a sharp contrast between chs. 1-5 and 6:1-8; the first chapters are full of darkness and sin, while this chapter is full of the hope of God's glory and holiness. Our hope is rooted in God and His holiness. Here are five truths about God & holiness that are essential from this vision —

- **God is ALIVE** —

- ✓ **year of King Uzziah's death** = Much has been made of whether or not Uzziah was alive or not when this was written (prob. not). That is not Isaiah's point, nor is the year (~740 B.C.). Isaiah is concerned about theology, not chronology. So, Uzziah serves as a contrast to God's nature & character.
 - Uzziah was a mostly good king of the two Southern tribes of Judah.
 - Ten years prior to his death, he was stricken with leprosy for unholy offering of incense (2 Chron. 26:16ff) — that was the result of his self-inflated and idolatrous pride.
 - *A good king went bad*, and it would go bad for the nation as well (note God's comment in **5:4**).
 - Isaiah also emphasized Uzziah's death; Isaiah is the only prophet to denote the time of an event by the death of a king rather than the year of a king's reign ("52nd year of Uzziah")
 - The contrast is not only between a good king gone bad and the holy and eternal King of Israel, but between a king who is *dead* and a King who is *ever living*. "Uzziah is dead, but God lives."
 - ... Fifty years from now, every ruler now ruling will be dead, but God will still be ruling.
 - ... In 110 years, all 7+ billion people on earth will be entombed in a grave, replaced by 7-8 billion or 10 billion others (should the Lord tarry). But God, who was alive before the worlds came into existence, will still be alive, and for 10 trillion times 10 trillion more generations — and beyond.
- ✓ In 1966, *Time* magazine declared God dead, saying: "God the creator of the universe, principle deity of the world's Jews, ultimate reality of Christians, the most eminent of all divinities, died late yesterday during major surgery undertaken to correct a massive diminishing influence."
- ✓ Those editors are now (likely) dead; but the Lord God of Heaven is still alive and ruling.

- ✓ When Uzziah died, Isaiah was graced to see the vision of God in all His splendor. What I — and the church — need today is not a new program, but a renewed vision of the reality of the living God.
- ✓ God never had a beginning; He will have no end; He is dependent on no one and nothing; He is alive and always will be. But more than just being alive, He is also authoritative...

• God is **AUTHORITATIVE** —

- ✓ He saw **the Lord** = *Adonai*. This was the name used not to denote the covenant relationship and eternal nature of God (YHWH), but His lordship, sovereignty, mastery, ownership. He is King.
- ✓ In contrast to **Uzziah**, who was a temporary and now dead king, *Adonai* is the eternal Sovereign.
- ✓ Not only does He possess a sovereign name, but He **sits enthroned** (eternally) on a sovereign throne
- ✓ And on that throne, He sits as both King and Judge. Isaiah was allowed to see what sat behind the curtain of Heaven's entrance, and there — where no human dares to go on his own — Isaiah saw not the ark of the covenant, but a kingly throne — the vision produces a “raw edge of terror.”
 - **lofty and exalted** = God's throne is high in the heavens, far above all other thrones.
 - **train of His robe...** = The greater the robe's train, the greater the authority — and this one filled the heavenly temple — far over the universe extended God's authority over humanity...
 - For those who were tempted to think God was inactive and ineffective (5:19), this is a reminder that God is not a small God in a small box in the back room of the temple! Even the heavens cannot contain God and His authority. He is trustworthy for all our anxious thoughts.

• God is **AWESOME** — all of His being is worthy of our awe and reverence.

- ✓ God is not alone in heaven or at His throne. He is surrounded by two rows of majestic **Seraphim** (i.e., “burning ones,” angels — and don't think cute and cuddly cherubs that sit in a curio cabinet).
- ✓ Note the description of these angels (who would terrify you if you saw one, Rev. 7-8, 16) —
 - **covered his face** = symbolic of the truth that no one can see God; the angels, even in Heaven and perfect in righteousness, are reverent before God, not wanting to see Him irreverently.
 - **covered his feet** = not because of unholiness, but in recognition that even in their holiness and submission to God, they are not worthy to stand in his presence (Ex. 3:5).
 - **two he flew** = that is, two wings were used in constant (and joyful) service of God. They were ready (always around Him) and obedient servants of God.
 - As great and perfect as the angels are — never marred by sin — they still revere their Maker with great humility and service.

• God is **HOLY** — These **Seraphim** (lit., “burning ones”) are consumed with one eternal message —

- ✓ What is most significant about the angels is not what they looked like, but what they said.
- ✓ Perhaps the angels formed two lines and called back and forth to one another **holy, holy, holy**
- ✓ Of all the attributes of God, this is the only one that is declared in “triplicate.”

- ✓ He is infinite in His holiness, and the triple use of the term emphasizes His perfection in holiness.
- ✓ When God is declared to be **holy**, what does that mean?
 - He is set apart and distinct. He is “wholly other” — there is nothing that corresponds to Him.
 - God’s holiness is His separateness from everything unclean, profane, evil, and common. It is His moral perfection and absolute rightness and purity.
 - Many things on earth are called “holy” — set apart to distinct uses *for God* — ground, assemblies, Sabbaths, nation of Israel, the city Jerusalem, garments, promises, men, women, Scriptures, hands, faith, even a kiss! If there are classes of some of these that are separate and unique from others, to be used for God, then what does it mean when we say that God is holy?
 - To say that God is holy is to say that He is devoted to Himself. There is no higher reality to which He must conform to be holy. For instance, God is not holy because He kept the Law; the Law is holy because God wrote it.

“He is incomparable. His holiness is his utterly unique divine essence. It determines all that he is and does and is determined by no one. His holiness is what he is as God which no one else is or ever will be. Call it his majesty, his divinity, his greatness, his value as the pearl of great price. In the end language runs out. In the word “holy” we have sailed to the world’s end in the utter silence of reverence and wonder and awe.” [John Piper, sermon on Is. 6:1-4.]

“It is impossible to understand the fulness of [God’s holiness] and yet you must understand as much as Scripture gives us. The absence of a clear understanding of God’s holiness is the reason for our shallowness, it is the reason for our impotence, it is the reason for our selfishness, it is the reason for our weakness, it is the reason for our disobedience. We really don’t understand how holy God is; that’s why we compromise, that’s why we are the worst kind of pragmatists who do only what fulfills our desires.” [John MacArthur, sermon on Is. 6:1-8.]

- ✓ God’s holiness is a particular emphasis of Isaiah. He calls Him “Holy One” 30 times:
 - **1:4** They have despised the **Holy One** of Israel, They have turned away from Him.
 - **5:19** And let the purpose of the **Holy One** of Israel draw near And come to pass, that we may know it.
 - **5:24** ...they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts And despised the word of the **Holy One** of Israel.
 - **10:17** And the light of Israel will become a fire and his **Holy One** a flame...
 - **10:20** Now in that day the remnant of Israel, and those of the house of Jacob who have escaped, will never again rely on the one who struck them, but will truly rely on the LORD, the **Holy One** of Israel.
 - **12:6** Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, For great in your midst is the **Holy One** of Israel.
 - **17:7** In that day man will have regard for his Maker And his eyes will look to the **Holy One** of Israel.
 - **29:19** ...the needy of mankind will rejoice in the **Holy One** of Israel.
 - **29:23** Indeed, they will sanctify the **Holy One** of Jacob And will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
 - **30:11** “Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, Let us hear no more about the **Holy One** of Israel.”
 - **30:12** Therefore thus says the **Holy One** of Israel, “Since you have rejected this word...”

- 30:15 For thus the Lord GOD, the **Holy One** of Israel, has said...
- 31:1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help...But they do not look to the **Holy One** of Israel...
- 37:23 "Whom have you reproached and blasphemed?...Against the **Holy One** of Israel!"
- 40:25 "To whom then will you liken Me That I would be *his* equal?" says the **Holy One**.
- 41:14 "...I will help you," declares the LORD, "and your Redeemer is the **Holy One** of Israel.
- 41:16 "But you will rejoice in the LORD, You will glory in the **Holy One** of Israel."
- 41:20 That they may see and recognize...That the hand of the LORD has done this, And the **Holy One** of Israel has created it.
- 43:3 "For I am the LORD your God, The **Holy One** of Israel, your Savior..."
- 43:14 Thus says the LORD your Redeemer, the **Holy One** of Israel...
- 43:15 "I am the LORD, your **Holy One**, The Creator of Israel, your King."
- 45:11 Thus says the LORD, the **Holy One** of Israel, and his Maker...
- 47:4 Our Redeemer, the LORD of hosts is His name, The **Holy One** of Israel.
- 48:17 Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the **Holy One** of Israel, "I am the LORD your God..."
- 49:7 Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel *and* its **Holy One**... "Because of the LORD who is faithful, the **Holy One** of Israel who has chosen You."
- 54:5 "For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the LORD of hosts; And your Redeemer is the **Holy One** of Israel, Who is called the God of all the earth."
- 55:5 "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the **Holy One** of Israel; For He has glorified you."
- 60:9 "...And for the **Holy One** of Israel because He has glorified you."
- 60:14 "The sons of those who afflicted you will come bowing to you, And all those who despised you will bow themselves at the soles of your feet; And they will call you the city of the LORD, The Zion of the **Holy One** of Israel."
- Isaiah wants his readers to know that God and God alone is the singular holy entity in all creation.
- ✓ It's no wonder that God's holiness is the eternal pre-occupation of these angels (**Rev. 4:8**)
 - For all eternity, they never tire of gazing at and meditating on and declaring his holiness.
 - Our problem is not that we've overdone and overworked the holiness of God; if we do not shudder at sin and if we are not amazed and delighted at God's holiness, it's because we have never truly seen or understood it (**1 Pt. 1:14-16**)

• **God is GLORIOUS** — the angels connect God's holiness to His glory.

- ✓ ***the whole earth is full of His glory*** = everywhere one looks on earth is a manifestation of God's glory — it's in the sky, it's in the molecules, the raindrops and sunshine, a smile (joy!) and tears (grief) and birds and flavors of food, and budding flowers, and couple walking hand in hand...
- ✓ To say this is to say that everywhere one looks is a revelation & manifestation of God's character.
- ✓ To say this is to say that everywhere one looks is an invitation to delight in and enjoy God. God's glory not only is a manifestation of who He is but delighting in who He is. In part, creation serves to invite us to enjoy God as the end (purpose) of creation. The world rejects that invitation (**Rom. 1:20f**).

- ✓ Even in its sin-cursed state, the earth and every created being in it gives evidence to God's reality.
- ✓ Look at the universe and you will see God; and based on the context of Is. 6, look at the universe and you will see reflections of God's holiness (and man's feeble attempts to bypass His holiness).
- ✓ The greatness of God is reflected not only in the earth, but in the simple declaration that produced **shaking foundations** and **smoke** filling the Temple — "God is here and you best be afraid..."

"How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing it is irresistible."
[C. S. Lewis.]

"In our age, as in every age, people are longing for happiness, not realizing that what they are looking for is holiness." [Jerry Walls]

2. A Perspective of Our **UNHOLINESS** (v. 5) — how unholy are we?

- When Isaiah saw the reality of God, his attention was on two things — the holiness of God and the unholiness of Isaiah. "The nearer we are to God, the greater our sense of unworthiness."
 - ✓ **Woe is me!** = Lit., "Oy!," "Alas!" "Oh no!"
 - Normally the prophets used this word **woe** as a lament, warning, or threat of imminent judgment against the enemies of God — people who were rebellious against God.
 - Here Isaiah saw himself as lost and he expected and lamented his own judgment.

"For the finite, the mortal, the incomplete, and the fallible to encounter the Infinite, the Eternal, the Self-consistent, and the Infallible is to know the futility and the hopelessness of one's existence....But it is not the recognition of his finitude which crushes Isaiah; it is his uncleanness." [Oswalt, pp. 182-3.]

- ✓ **I am ruined** = That is, "I am cut off, coming to a violent end, destroyed." "I'm a dead man." Why?
 - He is like the man caught by the police officer — "I'm caught..."
 - **I am a man of unclean lips** = He is not implying that he is the worst of all sinners or that the only thing that he's done that is evil is that he has uttered a few ungodly words. The words are a reflection of his heart — he should have praised God like the angels, and he was speaking with uncleanness. The problem wasn't his lips, but his heart. He's a sinner through and through. And so is everyone with whom he lives (**among a people...**)
 - **for my eyes have seen...** = Isaiah feels doom because he has seen the King and the King has seen him and his sin — both he and God have been unveiled and that revelation has left him quaking.
 - Even for the redeemed and forgiven man, sin still exists. Even when declared righteous by God, we still sin and God is concerned with that sin. That's why Paul has been so adamant to say that it is time to take our sanctification — our call to holiness that flows from justification — seriously (Rom. 13:11-14).

- God takes sin seriously:

“For one sin God banished our first parents from Eden. For one sin all the posterity of Canaan, a son of Ham, fell under a curse which remains over them to this day (Gen. 9:21). For one sin Moses was excluded from Canaan, Elisha’s servant smitten with leprosy, Ananias and Sapphira cut off out of the land of the living.” [Pink]

“Until we have seen ourselves as God [sees us], we are not likely to be much disturbed over conditions around us as long as they do not get so far out of hand as to threaten our comfortable way of life. We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing.” [Tozer]

“...no one can stand in the presence of God without becoming profoundly and devastatingly aware of his own wretchedness and sinfulness....If we don’t understand the holiness of God, we don’t understand our own sinfulness.” [MacArthur]

- One of the two greatest gifts God can give us is a clear understanding of our sinfulness. There is no redemption and no forgiveness and no righteousness apart from comprehension of sinfulness.
- When you see the holiness of God for what it truly is, we won’t be self-justifying and self-righteous. You will shrink back in horror with a clear understanding that you are worthy of *all* God’s wrath.

3. A Provision of **CHRIST’S Atonement (vv. 6-7)** — what has God done for us?

- To Isaiah’s fear and contrition, God sent an **angel** to apply **coal** from the **altar**. “God had not brought Isaiah into this experience merely to let him despair.” [Martin & Martin] This is grace!
- **Stones** were not used in the animal sacrifices, so this is probably an allusion to the stone that would be heated and used for the burning of incense so the priest could enter holy of holies.
 - ✓ The stone was applied to the **lips** — i.e., the sacrifice was applied to that which sinned against God.
 - ✓ The first result of the application was that **iniquity is taken away** — instantaneously, no more sin.
 - ✓ The second result of the application was **your sin is forgiven** (propitiated/atoned). The rebellious sin which missed the mark of God’s standard is cleansed. The word **forgiven** rests on the provision of the day of atonement (Lev. 16). The ransom price for sin was paid and God is satisfied.

- 2 Sam. 12:13 Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.
- Ps. 32:1 How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered!

- Now you notice that I said that the provision was *Christ’s* atonement — is that reading into text?
 - ✓ The benefit of the OT atonement was not in the sacrifice itself, but in the ultimate sacrifice that it anticipated — Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:6-7, 11-12; **10:8-14**).
 - ✓ Isaiah is not ruined because of the application of Christ’s righteousness and forgiveness...

- ✓ This forgiveness from God is a reflection of the holiness of God — He has not overlooked sin, but He has punished every sin so that the debt of every sin is paid. And for the repentant sinner, God Himself has provided the payment — He is both just and the justifier of the sinner (**Rom. 3:26**).

“...holiness is not primarily a relation of the creature to the Creator, but vice versa, and that it pertains to God in the first place, and to the creature in a secondary sense. Creatures are not holy in themselves, neither are they able to sanctify themselves. All sanctification and holiness proceeds from God.” [Bavinck]

- ✓ Our holiness is all because of God’s grace and Christ’s atonement...

4. An Obedience to God’s CALL (v. 8) — what shall we do?

- Throughout this entire vision, God has been remarkably silent. Now He speaks (apparently this was an inner-Trinitarian conversation that Isaiah was allowed to hear).
- **Whom shall I send...who will go for us?** = Doesn’t mean that God doesn’t know any more than when He called for Adam in the Garden — it’s an opportunity for Isaiah to respond on his own.
- **Here I am** = Before he even knew what the task was, He willingly, joyfully, lovingly answered.
 - ✓ His answer echoed that of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and Ananias (Saul/Paul) —
 - ✓ **send me** = Having been cleansed and forgiven by God, he is ready to serve God in the tradition of the Seraphim that surround the throne of God in heaven.
- Notice that there is no commissioning until there is cleansing. It is not until God has cleansed the man and equipped the man with the righteousness of Christ that the man is fit for service of Christ.
- Not just any man will do. God can use even unwilling servants (like Balaam — and his donkey, Num. 22:20), but our service will only have value and give glory to God if we are cleansed and living by and in conformity to His holiness. If we will serve Him, we must be cleansed vessels (**2 Tim. 2:20-22**).

CONCLUSION: Do you remember that God’s holiness is a major theme of this book (30x = “holy One”)?

In chapters 1-5, Isaiah recounted the rebellious sin of Israel. Now look at chapter 62; there Isaiah describes the promised restoration of Israel — **62:10-12**. Did you hear **the holy people**? That is the *first time* that phrase has appeared in the book. Until now in the book, only God is holy; but in chapter 62, He creates His own holy people for Himself. A holy God makes holy people to live for Him. He will do it with Israel; He has done it with us who are in Christ. It’s time to act on the holiness that He has granted to us and pursue sanctification with all our joy and effort.

BENEDICTION: **Romans 13:11-14**