

Holy, Holy, Holy

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[0 : 00] This is the Word of God. Please do keep that passage open in front of you if you can, but let us turn to the Lord for help before we come to His words. Father, these are glorious words, but they are also humbling words. We pray that You would show us Your glory as You did to Isaiah, that we might find ourselves ruined in ourselves, but with everlasting hope through the cleansing You offer in Your Son. Speak to us now by Your Spirit that Your kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Well, we've been in the book of Isaiah for some four or five weeks now, and thus far, I don't know if you've noticed that there's been one main theme, hasn't there? One big point throughout the opening five chapters of the book.

Judgment is coming. Judgment is coming because Isaiah is living in a time when God's people are not only not living according to God's law, but they are doing so unrepentantly, aren't they? They do not regret their actions and are quite happy to carry on their way. So Isaiah, so far up to this point in their book, hasn't he, has been looking at a disobedient people and he's rightly warned them of the impending calamity that will befall them if they would carry on their way? But in chapter 6 that we are looking at this evening, Isaiah finds himself looking at something very different, doesn't he? Isaiah is no longer looking at a disobedient people, but at a holy God. We're going to break the first half of chapter 6 up into three very simple parts as we just follow the flow of this chapter, and we begin where Isaiah begins, beholding the glory of God.

In the first four verses of this chapter, something of God's glory is revealed. Just look down there at verse 1 with me. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Isaiah's looking at a king, isn't he? He sees the Lord sitting on a king above every other king, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Why does that matter? You might well wonder. Well, I don't know if you saw the coronation of King Charles last year. I'm sure many of us did. As King Charles walked into Westminster Abbey, he was wearing a robe, wasn't he? As kings do. And the train of his robe was so long that he had to have four young men following behind him just to carry it for him. And not just anyone can go about rocking something like that, can they? If I walked in here this evening with a long robe behind me, you'd rightly start asking some questions.

[4 : 03] There was only one man that day wearing a robe because there was only one king. And the long train of his robe was the display, wasn't it, of the majesty and grandeur of the occasion.

And of the person in that great and prestigious role. It was no different in Isaiah's time. Kings and queens, the more powerful, right, the more important they were, or at least the more important they considered themselves to be, right, that the longer this robe would flow off behind them, the bigger and longer it was, was a sign of their own prestige and power. Isaiah looks at the Lord sitting that the word might even mean just the hem or the edge of his robe, and it fills the entire temple.

The temple was huge, right? It was designed to make you feel small so that you knew something of the presence of the God whose presence you were in.

The train of the Lord's robe fills the entire place. The point is very simply, this is a king like no other. Here is a king whose majesty immeasurably exceeds even the greatest monarch this world has ever seen.

Before Isaiah is a king like no other king. But interestingly, I don't know if you noticed as we're reading through, Isaiah doesn't say anything else, does he, about the one whom he sees sitting high and exalted on his throne.

[6 : 00] He doesn't describe what he sees on his throne, because I don't think he can. There are simply no words to describe the majesty of what Isaiah finds himself looking into here. Because if you look down there at verse 2, you'll see that Isaiah's no longer describing the one on the throne, is he?

Instead, he starts describing the gloriousness of the king's servants. Above the Lord on his throne were the seraphs.

This is the only time these creatures are mentioned in the Bible. Literally, the word means something like fiery ones. Each of them had six wings.

Whatever they are, these are majestic beings, aren't they? Fiery, six-winged creatures. Not something you bump into every day. And when they speak, in verse 4, when they speak, the foundations of the doorposts and the threshold shake.

At the voice of those who call, the temple fills with smoke. You sometimes hear, don't you, about the largest and loudest crowds at sporting events.

[7 : 32] It's usually in America, because they're a particularly excitable bunch. And when all these people pack into, sorry, Cassia, when all these people pack into a stadium, right, 100,000 people all crammed into this small little space, sometimes, when all of them get together and scream and shout hysterically at the top of their voices, it causes what they call a spike in seismic activity.

Sometimes, somewhere, right, there is a laboratory instrument somewhere, a seismograph that picks up a little squiggle. It is something.

But somebody walking by likely wouldn't notice anything other than the noise. A precise instrument picks up a minute change. It detects the slightest tremor.

But 100,000 people cannot shake the ground with their voices. These seraphim call out to one another.

And the ground before Isaiah visibly shakes. The doorposts tremble at the voice, the voice of the king's servant.

[8 : 57] Did you see what is going on here? We're being presented with this picture of sort of power and majesty that we can barely comprehend. It is at the very limits of our imagination.

It is hard for our finite mans to fathom. These fiery, six-winged creatures who cause the temple to tremble with their voices and fill it with smoke.

It is beyond anything we've ever seen. But these are just the creatures. These are just the creatures surrounding the creator.

the point is that this isn't even the Lord sitting on his throne. These are just his throne room attendants. The seraphs themselves are a fearful sight to behold.

They are far more powerful and glorious than anything we've ever seen. These are mighty creatures. But look at how they posture themselves before the one on the throne.

[10 : 00] Look there in verse 2. What are they doing with four of their wings? They're covering themselves, aren't they? With two wings they cover their face.

With two wings they cover their feet. They're covering their entire beings. These mighty, majestic, powerful creatures are literally shielding themselves from the one before them on the throne.

We've been blessed haven't we with a few sunny days recently. It's been a pleasant change. And so if you've wandered around the city at any point in the last few days you'll almost certainly have seen a good number of people wearing sunglasses.

People wear sunglasses don't they because they're wiser than me and they don't like spending their whole day squinting when the sun is out. we need to protect our eyes don't we?

Even if we're not looking directly at it the sun is bright enough that we need to do something about it even if we're just trying to go about our normal day. Think of a moment maybe it's happened in the last few days I'm sure it's happened to us all at some point in our life when we've accidentally caught ourselves looking directly into the sun.

[11 : 22] What did you do in that moment? What did you do when you found yourself looking straight into the sun? You did not did you? Sort of carry on looking at it going oh that's nice.

We turn away don't we? We cover our eyes. Our eyes cannot handle it because it is so bright. What is so bright? A burning ball of gas 93 million miles away is too much for our eyes to handle. Imagine for a second take every star in the sky put them all together many of them bigger and brighter than our sun put yourself ten feet in front of it.

You can't imagine it can you but you know what would happen it would burn through you in an instance. Your eyelids would be useless wouldn't they? you would be literally blinded immediately.

Our God holds every single one of those stars in the palm of his hands. seraphs. It is no wonder is it that the seraphs are shielding themselves from the God who is light before them.

[12:52] Hopefully we're now starting to see something albeit just a fraction of what Isaiah is looking into here. It is no wonder the seraphs who call out literally crying to one another as they shield themselves holy holy holy holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. Holy holy holy holy. To be holy in very simple terms is to be set apart from everything else.

And these heavenly beings cry out to one another about how set apart the one on the throne is. We might think the seraphim are pretty impressive creatures but they know they are as nothing, nothing compared to the one on his exalted throne.

There is no comparison, there is no likeness, he is not just different in quality from us, he is completely other. We are much closer to the seraphim than the seraphim are to God, for them we are but creatures.

And neither can face the glory of the one who sits on the throne. There is an absolute otherness to him. He is holy, holy, holy, nowhere else in Scripture are three adjectives used like this about anyone or anything.

[14:34] There is nothing like God, there is nothing that comes even close to comparing to his glory, a glory that fills all the earth.

There is no containing his majesty and splendor, there is no describing with human words what Isaiah sees in front of him. we cannot describe him, we cannot behold him, we can only cry out with a seraphim, holy, holy, holy.

But what about Isaiah? What about Isaiah, the prophet who has spent five chapters previously preaching to a wicked people, here he finds himself looking into God's throne room, seeing the majestic seraphim shield themselves from the immeasurably more majestic king seated on his throne and what is his reaction in verse five?

Woe to me. Woe to me. woe as we saw last week means judgment, right?

Judgment is coming, judgment is deserved to you who are guilty. We saw in chapter five, didn't we, that Isaiah rightly pronounced six woes upon God's idolatrous covenant people.

[16:34] But here, Isaiah sees God in all his glory and the only woe he has left is for himself. The moment Isaiah sees God for who he is is the moment Isaiah sees himself most clearly for who he is.

I'm a man of unclean lips. Why does he know he's unclean? For my eyes have seen the king, the lord of hosts.

it is good and right that we condemn wickedness when we see it in the world around us.

But when we behold the God who made us, when we behold him in all his glory, we very quickly will realize that we too are unclean.

We might think we are good people when we compare ourselves to other people. I think we're usually very good, aren't we, at picking out people to compare ourselves to who we know will make us look good.

[18:03] But when compared to the absolute purity, the infinite holiness of the king of kings, the question is not, are you better than the average person?

It's not about whether you've done more good than bad. Are you absolutely perfect? Completely spotless, as pure as can be?

Utterly blameless, without any fault. If the answer is no, and let me tell you, it is an emphatic no, isn't it, for every single one of us, then we too will find ourselves, like Isaiah, ruined and unclean before a holy God because the incomparable light, the holy, holy God will reveal every little impurity, expose every stain we bear.

Woe to all of us if we were to stand before God in our sinfulness. us. We too are unclean and totally helpless to do anything about it for ourselves.

That is where Isaiah finds himself and all humanity with him. I am a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

[19:56] Isaiah is before the presence of a holy God with nothing to offer except for his sins. Woe to me.

Isaiah can do nothing. He stands helpless at the entrance of the temple, unable to save himself from the judgment he knows he deserves.

Isaiah can do nothing. But God does something. Although he is helpless in verses 6 and 7, we see Isaiah's guilt removed.

One of the seraphim is sent over to Isaiah with a burning coal, taken from the altar, and with it he touches the lips of Isaiah.

The altar where this coal comes from is the place in the temple where the priests would offer sacrifices. And from this place of priestly sacrifice comes the burning coal that touches what was unclean, Isaiah's mouth, and makes it clean.

[21 : 17] The impurities gone, sin, the sin atoned for, the guilt removed. The messenger of God declares to the one who confessed himself worthy of only judgments, to him he says, your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.

The judgment he deserved has been dealt with. It is a wonderful picture, isn't it, of the redemption, the forgiveness that God offers for helpless sinners.

And we now know, don't we, that on that altar, that sacrifice, what the prophet never saw in his vision, was the Son of God hanging on a cross.

We, like Isaiah, come aware of our sin and with nothing in our hands to offer. But God has sent his Son as a sacrifice that we might too have our guilt removed and our sin atoned for.

When the glory of God is revealed, we will find it revealing the depths of our own sin, but to those who recognize their uncleanness before God, he cleanses with the precious blood of Christ.

[22 : 58] the point here is not to wallow in our failings, but seeing them as we should, to then lift our eyes to the Lord of hosts and be amazed, delight, and rejoice in the God of grace who willingly pays our debt for us, who makes us clean so we can come before him, not in fear of his holiness, but gladly and boldly as his children, clothed in the righteousness of his son, with our guilt forever removed, and our sins forever forgiven.

vision. The opening seven verses of Isaiah 6 are a wonderful presentation of the gospel to us, aren't they?

God's glory revealed, our sin exposed, but our guilt removed. But this vision Isaiah has of God in his temple does not end there.

having been cleansed and forgiven, Isaiah in the second half of this chapter in response now offers himself in service of the king.

In verses 8 to 13 we have Isaiah's commission from God. And slight spoiler, it is not glamorous. Just look down at verse 8 there with me.

[24 : 36] A voice cries out saying, who will go for us? And Isaiah with his cleansed lips says, here I am, send me. And at first, it sounds like it's going to be this great evangelistic commission.

Your sins have been forgiven, now go and tell others the good news. But look at the task Isaiah has given. Go and say to this people, be ever hearing.

but never understanding. Be ever seeing, but never perceiving. The middle of verse 10. Do this, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Go and dull the hearts of the people because otherwise they might turn and be healed. that is the task Isaiah has given.

How long am I to do this for? He asks in verse 11. Until the cities lie ruined, until the Lord has taken everyone away and the land is utterly forsaken.

[25 : 52] Even if a tenth remains in it, if there is a fraction left, it will be ruined utterly again. Isaiah is being told by God to go and harden a people's hearts so that they will not repent, but instead be utterly laid to waste.

What, we might well wonder, is going on here? I think if we want to at least begin to get our heads around it, we need to make sure we understand exactly who Isaiah is speaking to.

Let's begin with who he is not speaking to. He is not speaking to those outside of Israel, outside of God's covenant community.

So, if you are here this evening and you are, maybe you're not a regular attender or you're not part of this church, please know that this message in the second half of Isaiah 6, these terrifying words, they are not, they are not directed at you.

God wants to and does reach out in love and grace to those who do not know him. He wants you to hear the gospel proclaimed in the first half of this chapter.

[27 : 15] neither is Isaiah speaking to those who are part of God's covenant community and live in repentance of their sins.

Isaiah is not, is he, to preach this message to himself because he has acknowledged wholeheartedly that he deserves judgment and is wholly reliant on God's grace. He has been forgiven because he has recognized his need for forgiveness. So if you are living aware of your own sin and living complete dependence on God to remove your guilt and atone for your sins through his son, if you are living as a broken sinner who knows your only hope in life and death is in Jesus Christ, rest assured these words are not for you either. but these words are for you if you are part of God's covenant community, if you know the character of God and the gospel and yet do not come broken by the depravity of your own sin before him. If your hope is not in Christ alone but you hear him proclaimed week by week, this message is, I think, for you because Isaiah is to go and proclaim this message to this people, isn't he, verse 9. [29 : 13] And this people, as we have seen over the last five chapters, are a people who knew who God was. They knew the character of God.

They knew how to live a life pleasing and honoring to him, but they did not do so. And they did not come confessing and repenting when they failed to do so, but instead decided for themselves what was right and wrong, good and evil, practicing their religion outwardly, but inwardly living as their own God for their own gain.

to a people who do not acknowledge their sin in the presence of a holy God, despite having the gospel made known to them, Isaiah, following God's call, preaches judgment to them. It is a hard word to bear, isn't it, but no, brothers and sisters, this is not some Old Testament doom and gloom message that Jesus does away with, not in the slightest.

In the passage Myrtle read for us earlier from Matthew 13, Jesus reaffirms Isaiah's solemn message, doesn't he?

[30 : 54] His disciples come and ask him, why do you speak in parables? these stories that not everyone understands the meaning of. And he doesn't say, does he, that people find it like a nice image so they can latch onto and everyone can pick up what I'm saying.

Jesus responds by quoting the second half of Isaiah 6. He speaks in parables so that those who know the gospel but continue to live relying on their own good works.

He speaks in parables so that their hearts would be hardened in their unbelief. Those are the words of Jesus.

Isaiah is not speaking Old Testament here. Jesus preaches exactly the same message. language. It is fearful language.

It is language, I confess, not to fully understand. But this is God's word to us. People who continually reject the gospel will have their hearts hardened to it so that not only will they not hear its message, but so that they cannot hear its message.

[32 : 20] If we do not find ourselves broken before the throne of God when his glory has been revealed, we put ourselves in a very perilous position.

But Isaiah knows, mercifully, and Jesus knows, that that is not the end of the story.

Because neither Isaiah 6 nor Jesus' words in Matthew 13 end with desolation, but rather with hope. Isaiah does not leave us in a completely barren wilderness, but with a holy seed, the promise of something to come.

And Jesus, having quoted this terrifying passage in Isaiah 6, he then turns to his disciples, he turns to those who have chosen to follow him despite their many failings, and he says, but blessed are you, blessed are you.

[33 : 43] The disciples of Jesus, blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly, I tell you, Jesus says, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

Isaiah's vision sounds pretty incredible, doesn't it? But Jesus is saying, right, if you gave him the choice between having that vision and sitting where we sit this evening, Isaiah would have longed to have been where we are.

for what is shadows and seeds in the Old Testament has now been revealed. Isaiah's hope was in a holy offspring, a holy seed, someone, somewhere down the line, who would save the faithful remnant of God's people.

Isaiah longed to see the day that Christ would come. We sit here with Jesus before us, the word made flesh, the long-awaited hope made known.

We do not wait for a seed to grow, we worship a risen Savior. And we worship him because he has brought to us all who put their trust in him, the cleansing and forgiveness that was made known to Isaiah.

[35 : 27] no, brothers and sisters, that is you if your faith is in Christ Jesus. It will not be perfect, it will be floundering.

But if your faith is in Christ Jesus, if you know he is the only way you can stand before God, then please be assured this evening those terrifying words we just heard a moment ago, they are not for you.

If you confess that your only hope is in Christ Jesus, you belong to him. brothers and sisters, let us pray that the fearful words at the end of this chapter would not be for any of us, but rather that we, like Isaiah, would be left in awe of the holiness of our gods, recognize and confess our uncleanness before him and so find our guilt removed and sin atoned for as we put our hope and trust wholly in the holy seed, Jesus Christ, who offered himself as a one-time cleansing sacrifice for all.

If you have seen the depths of your sin this evening, bring it all to God and rejoice knowing he is a God of great grace, for that that is you, and I pray it would be all of us, know that there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, not now, not ever, because there is and always will be forgiveness with our God.

Let us respond to his words now by coming before him in prayer. Father, we acknowledge that you are a holy, holy, holy God, that you are completely other in your essence, that we could not behold you, that we would have to shield ourselves from your presence.

[38 : 20] We confess that your glory and your majesty reveal in us the depths of our guilt, our uncleanness, our sinfulness, that we praise you, our Lord and our God, that although we are helpless on our own, you offer us forgiveness in your precious son, Jesus Christ.

May we all find life in him. Father, keep us humble and reliant always on your grace, never trusting in our own deeds, but seeking to live and love you as the God who has saved us in spite of who we are.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.