

## God Is Holy

Isaiah 6:1-13

### Proceed With Caution

God's holiness is the most daunting of all topics, because to study it is to study the very "Godness" of God. If we got a tiny glimpse of God's holiness, we would experience something that is so utterly unlike us, so totally distinct from anything else we know. The result would be the terrifying feeling that our very self is being disintegrated—like what would happen if a drop of water could come into contact with the sun. There is no such thing as a casual approach to God's holiness.

So if we study this topic properly, we must proceed with caution. If we cannot identify with Isaiah's cry of woe in God's holy presence ("Woe is me, for I am undone!" Isaiah 6:5) we have not sufficiently understood God's holiness.

### But Is It Relevant?

It might seem that a topic such as God's holiness is a million miles removed from our day-to-day lives. "What, does it have to do with *my* friends at school, *my* stress at work, *my* struggling child, my aging parents, *my* failing health? Thinking about God's holiness might be a suitable activity for monks and mystics, but I need to hear about God's love, power, and faithfulness!"

But what if we can't even understand God's love, power, and faithfulness until we see them in light of his holiness? And what if the very reason we struggle as we do at work, school, home, etc. is because we know so little about God's holiness? The most practically-oriented book in the Bible—containing topics as relevant as money, friends, marriage, sex, anger, alcohol, health, and happiness—has this statement: "The knowledge of the *Holy One* is insight" (Proverbs 9:10). There is no more practical topic than the holiness of God.

### God's Holiness Explained

What is holiness? The word in Hebrew (קֹדֶשׁ, *qōdeš*, pronounced *koh-desh*) has the idea of something that is separate, or having its own specific purpose or category. In the Old Testament, people (such as priests) or objects (such as utensils) were considered "holy"—separated for a unique purpose from everything else. It was crucial to draw a clear distinction between that holy person or item, and everything else that was considered "common."

God's holiness, then, is everything that makes him above, beyond, and distinct from everything else. And because *everything* about God is above, beyond, and distinct from everything else, holiness is not just one of his many attributes; rather, it is the foundation of all his attributes. For example, to say that God is holy in his *love* means that he loves in a way that is above, beyond, and distinct from every other kind of love.

### God's Holiness Experienced

A key text on the holiness of God is Isaiah 6:1-13, which records Isaiah's encounter with the Holy God. The text unfolds God's holiness in four movements.

1. **A view of God's holiness.** Isaiah notes that this took place "in the year that King Uzziah died." Uzziah had reigned for 52 years, but the more successful he became, the more arrogant he grew (2 Chronicles 26:15). His arrogance reached a new height when he marched into the temple to offer incense—as if he were not only a king, but a priest too. Immediately God afflicted him with

leprosy, and he lived in quarantine until he died (2 Chronicles 26:20-22). Against this murky background, God's holiness shines bright: Here is a King who outlasts every human king.

The details of Isaiah's vision communicate the intensity of God's holiness. That "the train of his robe filled the temple" shows that every part of the temple (and, by extension, the earth) is touched by God's holiness. The anatomy of the seraphim ("burning ones") also highlights God's holiness. Of the seraph's six wings, only two are used for flying. Of the other four, two are used to shield himself, and two are used to show respect in view of God's holiness. In addition, their chorus thunders forth God's holiness: "Holy, holy, holy!"

2. **The effect of God's holiness.** The effect of God's holiness was both earth-shaking and self-shattering. Not only did "the foundations of the threshold [shake]" but this vision compelled Isaiah to cry out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" (6:5). If it sounds strange to us that Isaiah mentions his lips at such a moment, we only need to remember that Isaiah was a prophet. He needed to use his lips and mouth to fulfill his calling. But how could a man with unholy speech speak on behalf of a holy God? By extension, how could the people of Israel represent a holy God to the world, if they were so defiled and sinful ("and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips")? An experience of God's holiness will always leave us with a deep, painful awareness of our complete inability to stand *in* God's presence, much less to stand *for* God's presence!
3. **The gift of God's holiness.** One of the "burning ones" takes a "burning coal" from the altar and touches it to Isaiah's mouth. Whether or not he literally feels the searing pain of a coal torching his lips is less important than what this action means: the removal of Isaiah's sin. "Your guilt is taken away," the messenger said, "and your sin atoned for" (6:7). In other words, Isaiah too became holy. Of course, he was not holy *like* God; rather he was holy *for* God—set apart to serve God.

But how did this happen? Of course, a burning coal on one's lips can't really make any moral difference. There are two important clues in this cauterizing scene. First, there is the *direction* of the holiness. According to the Old Testament ceremonial laws, when something holy touches something unholy, the holy becomes unholy. But here the direction is reversed. The holy (the burning coal) made the unholy become holy. Second, there is the *source* of the holiness: it came from the altar. The altar was the place where something innocent was sacrificed in the place of what was sinful. The meaning becomes clear when you consider that Isaiah himself would later prophesy about someone who became a sacrifice to make others holy—"Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . His soul makes an offering for guilt" (Isaiah 53:7, 10). This prophecy would be in the 1st century A. D. on a little hill outside Jerusalem. There, Jesus of Nazareth, a truly holy man, hung dying on the cross. More was happening than a miscarriage of Roman justice. Jesus, God's son, was bearing our guilt so that we could be holy. This is especially clear in a statement from the Apostle Paul who wrote that "Christ Jesus . . . became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification [holiness] and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

**The response to God's holiness.** In response to this gift of God's holiness, Isaiah moved from saying "Woe is me!" to "Here am I!" The first is a cry of despair that sees only our sinfulness in view of God's holiness. The second is a cry of delight in view of God's grace that makes us holy.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word “holiness”?
2. Have there been times in your life when you have been intensely aware of God’s holy presence?  
What were the circumstances, and what effect did it have on you?
3. What are some possible indicators in our lives that we fail to properly appreciate God’s holiness?
4. Why did Isaiah move from crying “Woe is me!” to “Here I am!”? What does this teach us about the impact God’s holiness should have upon us?
5. Identify a struggle or challenge you will face within the next 48 hours. How might a view of God’s holiness change your attitude, actions, or perspective toward this struggle?