

**The Relentless Gospel:
Seeing God, Serving God
Patrick Murphy - Nov 21, 2021**

Intro:

How do you put a bow tie on the book of Acts? The challenging nature of the task exists because of its apparent and abrupt ending. I think Paul's last quote to the Jews in Rome points us in the direction we should go. Paul quotes Isaiah 6, verses 9-10, but his uses of those lines intend to draw his audience to all of Isaiah 6. His strategy is called metalepsis, and we use it today too. If we say, "4 score and 7 years ago," what are we saying? We are recalling President Lincoln's Gettysburg address. Or we may say, "I have a dream," to allude to Dr. King's speech or the civil rights movement as a whole. A small snippet recalls a whole story.

Why Isaiah 6? What is so important about it? It is an image or picture of what the Gospel is. It is a glimpse behind the curtain of heaven to reveal what all people must come to know. That there is a High King of Heaven, and he is Holy. It also shows why the Gospel is relentless and why the church continues to be God's messengers to the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 6

Knowing God is encountering his Holiness.

Isaiah 6:1-4

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphim were standing above him; they each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies; his glory fills the whole earth." ⁴ The foundations of the doorways shook at the sound of their voices, and the temple was filled with smoke.

We start with a clear and unmistakable assertion.

God is King! The name of God spoken by Isaiah is Lord or "addoni," literally stating he is The Sovereign, and the evidence for his rule is his holiness. We might not have a clear understanding of God's holiness. I think we all know the word, but our definitions or emphasis might differ. So we should clear some things up about God's holiness.

- **God's Holiness is something wholly-other. vs. 1-2**

The hem of his robe filling the temple is a preposterous statement. Yet, the preposterous is intended to serve as a placeholder for the realized majesty of God's holiness. Words fail to convey the true majesty of what Isaiah is encountering. That is because there is nothing in all creation that correlates to God's holiness. A.W. Tozer conveys this idea well when he says:

We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God's holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God's power and admire his wisdom, but his holiness he cannot even imagine.¹

It is more than moral purity and sinlessness as most Christians have come to conceive of God's holiness. Look no further than the Seraphim flying around God. They are pure beings, their name literally means burring ones, yet God's holiness is so wholly-other that they shield their face and cover their feet, all while being drawn into it. That's because...

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 104

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- **God's Holiness is invigorating. vs. 3a**

Isaiah and the angels are captivated by God's holiness. The angel's call to one another is not a task forced upon them but an eruption of praise coming from within them. God's holiness is their source of purpose. "Holy, Holy, Holy," is a repetition used by Isaiah and other biblical writers to highlight or put something in bold print. God is holy, holier, and holiest.

- **God's Holiness is aggressive.² vs. 3b**

The tangible element of God's holiness is his glory. Think of God's glory as the wrapper around God's holiness. That glory is either already or will one day encompass the whole earth. One day every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess when the Glory of God advances across the earth. It is advancing across the earth; therefore, it would be wrong to think it is tame, docile, or dormant.

- **God's Holiness is confronting.**

When Isaiah sees God in his glory, he is frightened. He's terrified because, unlike the angels, he immediately knows he is unclean! God's holiness confronts his sin. His holiness confronts even the inanimate object of the temple, doorways, and columns. They shake at the proclamation of praise and his holiness.

Can you imagine being Isaiah? I cannot. We have the benefit of reading about his vision, but he lived it. God for a moment pulled back the veil, revealing heaven, and he was

² Dale Ralf Davis, *Stump Kingdom: Isaiah 6-12* (Scotland: Christian Focus; 2017)

2. The holiness of God reveals the depravity of mankind, resulting in the terror of mankind.

Isaiah 6:5 Then I said: Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies.

The whole of God's holiness in all its goodness reveals to Isaiah how lost and wicked of a man he is. "Woe is me for I am ruined." Woe is not a passing expression but a substantive exasperation of lament. Deep guilt and sorrow overcome Isaiah because God's holiness reveals more than his wrongdoing or ceremonial uncleanness but the utter decay of his being.

But why are his lips the focus? Why did Isaiah cry out, "I am a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips?" Then a little later, the angel touches his lips with the coal. Why not his heart? Jesus conveys to his disciples a simple truth, "out of the mouth the heart speaks." What comes out of a person's mouth reveals what is in their heart. Isaiah knows his lips have not served to honor God but to bring worship to himself, to serve his own ends, and unlike the angels, could never be used in holy service to God. Isaiah is ruined.

There are two forms of saying sorry I have come across so far in life. There are nuances, but I believe every "I'm sorry" either falls in one category of "I'm sorry for what I've done," and the other is "I'm sorry I got caught." Do you know what I mean? A dramatic example of this happened about six years ago when my former youth pastor and supervisor, with whom I got started serving in the church, was caught kissing a girl in the youth group. He called me that night to apologize, saying he was in bad place... Is there anything else? Well, there was a lot more. Over 4 months, more allegations came out. The man ended up going to jail. His first apology was only sorry for getting caught; he was sorry for what he had done when he was sent to jail by that time.

Even that hardly conveys the depth of Isaiah's sorrow though. The holiness of God brought Isaiah immediately to a deep sense of despair of woe. "Woe is me" is a curse he is bringing onto himself. Look at the way it is used throughout scripture:

- Lamentations 5:16 The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned.
- Matthew 23:23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, and yet you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness.
- Luke 17:1 He said to his disciples, "Offenses will certainly come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"

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As a prophet, Isaiah is supposed to bring the curse to the nation that rebels from God, but instead, he must bring it upon himself. If we desire an experience like Isaiah had, we don't truly know for what we are asking. Like Isaiah, we would instantly know there is no hope for us in the presence of the sovereign God. So he does the only thing he can do, confess his depravity in terror.

Like Isaiah, we are sinners not because we sin but because we're born with a sinful nature. It's baked into the cake. It's why Paul writes to the Romans, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God." For Isaiah's hopeless terror is God's holiness accomplishing one of its ends. It leads mankind to repentance.

3. God's holiness results in atonement for the repentant or destruction for the rebellious.

Isaiah 6:6-7; ⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷He touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your iniquity is removed, and your sin is atoned for.

Although our natural mind can never grasp the holiness of God, our souls feel the effect of it. I remember the night I asked God to reveal to me the weight of my sin. I don't think it was a wise prayer or a noble prayer, but I prayed it, and the Lord gave me but a glimpse of my sin. I was distraught, sorrow overcame my feelings, and joy seemed to have vanished. All I could do at that moment was repent. As Isaiah repents, crying out to God. It is at that moment God's redemption comes to Isaiah. The "burring one" brings coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips.

No imagery is wasted in our account. I believe we are supposed to analyze the event, each detail, to draw out the importance of Isaiah's reconciliation with God. Let's do that with this interaction.

- **God draws near to the sinner.** God draws near to Isaiah in his ruin. God is the agent of salvation for all people of all time. Even in Isaiah's sin, God delights in restoring his creation to himself. His holiness exposes us to our filthiness yet also provides for our cleanliness.
- **God provides the sacrifice for the sinner.** The angel takes a coal from the altar and touches his lips. The coal comes from the place of sacrifice, where a substitute is offered for the people's sin. This is an early foreshadowing of Jesus' Christ's sacrifice on the cross to pay the just penalty for sin.
- **God justifies the sinner.** Imagine for a moment the pain of hot coal touching your lips. The pain we might be envisioning is outweighed by the meaning of the act. What took place on the altar is now applied to Isaiah. The sacrifice completely covers or atones for Isaiah's sin. He now stands as the angels do before a Holy God, blameless.

It is a beautiful picture but a shadow of what God has done for us through the power and work of Jesus. God's holiness exposes us to our filthiness yet also provides for our cleanliness. Yet if a person refuses the work of Christ and rejects the grace of God, his Holiness will destroy the rebelliousness of sin forever.

What happens now? Instead of God's holiness producing sheer terror Isaiah, he can worship God in the safety of his holiness.

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4. God's holiness draws the saints into faithful service.

Isaiah 6:8-10; ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord asking: Who will I send? Who will go for us? I said: Here I am. Send me. ⁹ And he replied: Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive. ¹⁰ Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed.

Does God want to heal his people?

- **Faithful service is not worldly success.**

God is candid with Isaiah. We initially perceive that God's reluctance to have his people know the truth is acutely God's candid honesty to Isaiah. The people will harden their hearts to the message. Because of the sinful nature and desire to be self-gods, the message will dull their minds, darken their hearts, and blind their eyes to the truth. Worldly success of winning over thousands won't happen; instead, it will be rejection. Praise God for his honesty to Isaiah and us.

Herein lies Paul's reason for quoting verses 9 and 10 to the Jews in Rome. They don't need superficial healing; they need an atonement as Isaiah found before God. An atonement received only by faith in Jesus. The book of Acts is filled with gut-wrenching stories of wordy failure; the martyrdom of Steven, the riots of Ephesus, the ridicule of Athens, Paul's stoning in Lystra. The list can go on, and yet why did they continue? Why did the church carry on? Because like Isaiah, they caught a glimpse of God's holiness and stood firm in his promises. They continued because...

- **Faithful service hopes in promises given.**

Isaiah 6:11-13 “¹¹ Then I said, “Until when, Lord?” And he replied: Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate, ¹² and the Lord drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land. ¹³ Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again. Like the terebinth or the oak that leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump.

How long, oh Lord? How long will your anger burn? How long will we declare your message to your creation? The answer is clear until the end of days when the Holiness of God confronts the whole earth. Many will turn away, but I will have a remnant, says God.

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Like the church in Acts, we are drawn into the service of God. His holiness draws us in, and we believe his promises will come to pass.

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Conclusion

I have said nothing of King Uzziah until now. All of this took place in the year king Uzziah died. He was a good king reigning for 52 years. He brought stability to the kingdom, religious reform, and confidence to withstand their enemies. With his passing, those days are passing away. The Assyrian King has his eyes fixed on conquest. But in the year Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the High King of Heaven seat on his throne high and lifted up, and the temp was filled with the hem of his robe, and the Seraphim were saying "holy, holy, holy, is the lord of armies, the who earth is filled with his glory."

The Lord still sits on his throne, from that day until this one. We need to be reminded the God, who gave us his relentless, Gospel continues to call his messengers to carry to the ends of the earth. As he told his disciples so, too is he conveying to us:

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

For this to take root in our life we need to be reminded we serve a Holy God, a terrifying God, a mercifully God, an atoning God, a God who is honest and candid with his people. A God who loves his creation and pursues his creation, and cleanses his creation, and establishes his creation in righteousness. The sort of God who makes you want to say, "Here I am, send me!"