

## **Gospel Foundations: A Holy God**

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

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*Praise waits for Thee in Zion, Lord, to Thee vows paid shall be. O Thou that hearer art of prayer, all flesh shall come to Thee. Let us worship God.*

Now turn with me if you would to the prophecy of Isaiah and chapter 6. The prophecy of Isaiah chapter 6. Let's come before God in prayer.

*Father we thank You again for the Scriptures, but without the help of Your Spirit we cannot profit. And so as we read this passage we ask for Your blessing. Enable us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting 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, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another 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 at 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!"

Then 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 has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." And He said, "Go, and say to this people:

'Keep on hearing but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and

understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And He said, "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled." The holy seed is its stump.

Amen. May God bless to us that reading of His Word.

Now this is part of a series of sermons, the third in "The Gospel-Centered Life" and tonight and for the next couple of weeks we're going to be looking at some foundations, some foundations, Gospel foundations. And tonight I want us to consider the holiness of God.

Isaiah is given here a vision of God. It's a profound, biblical illustration of a standing principle in the Christian life, that our service is determined by our knowledge of God. The way God makes Himself known shapes the pattern of our Christian service and our Christian life. I think if I had time I could have illustrated that in the life of the apostle Paul. I think the vision of God, of Christ, that he saw on the Damascus Road shaped the entirety of his ministry and his theology. That glimpse of God on the Damascus Road shaped his entire ministry. I think you could make a similar case in the life of Peter - his encounter at Caesarea Philippi with Jesus and perhaps the resurrection appearance of Jesus that 1 Corinthians 15 barely alludes to, so touching and private an occasion it must have been. I think you could say the same for Abraham and Moses and perhaps Ezekiel. Their vision of God, their encounter with God shaped their ministry.

Isaiah saw the Holy One of Israel and if you were to read the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah you would immediately be aware of the fact that the most used descriptive that Isaiah employs for God is the Holy One of Israel. He was never to forget this encounter. And particularly important and relevant is the fact that he records for us both the time and the place of this vision of God in the temple. The time was, as verse 1 records, "the year that King Uzziah died." Uzziah was, on the whole, a good king. He had reigned for fifty-two years. He had seen prosperity and blessing and revival. And then, in the latter period of his life when the Assyrian threat was at its greatest, he took matters into his own hand and offered in the place of the high priest an offering upon the altar of God contrary to God's law, and God you'll remember struck him down with leprosy. He would have been taken by the priests out of the temple and immediately to a sanctuary, a leper's house where he would live for the rest of his life, excommunicated from his office and the privileges of his office, excommunicated from fellowship with God's people.

And perhaps as Isaiah is contemplating that very event, and the subsequent now death of King Uzziah, looking perhaps to the very place in the temple where a

few years before the king had been taken out, struck down with leprosy, that it is here in the very temple of God that God comes to Isaiah the prophet with this amazing demonstration of His utter awesome holiness.

And three things emerge from this chapter that I want to allude to tonight. The first and most obvious is that Isaiah is given a vision of God's holiness and secondly a vision of God's judgment, and thirdly a vision of God's grace, or if you like, a vision of the Gospel itself.

### **I. A vision of God's holiness.**

To begin with, he is given this vision of the holiness of God. Now the word holy in the Old Testament has the connotation of separatedness. And fundamentally holiness is separation from sin. God is holy because He cannot even look upon sin. He is utterly removed from the very location and presence of sin. In the Old Testament it could be measured in terms of distance and God comes here to the prophet Isaiah and breaks through his mental understanding and categories that he had and God stretches him in a way that he had perhaps never understood before, in a mental way, in an emotional way, in a psychological way, in terms even of his very preaching.

Scholars debate the location of this vision in Isaiah chapter 6 because we have here Isaiah's call to ministry — “Who will go for Me?” “Here am I! Send me,” Isaiah says when in actual fact he has been ministering as a prophet for five chapters already. This isn't Isaiah's first call to ministry. It is in fact, and I want you to think of it in this way tonight, it is in fact a re-acquaintance with the nature and character of God in its most profound sense in terms of the Gospel, in terms of God's forgiveness of sinners that Isaiah encountered in the temple as an already called servant of the Lord. He had already been preaching. He already knew God's character and now comes an audio-visual display raising the awareness of what the holiness of God means. It's like going from 2-D to 3-D. This is holiness in three dimensions. And he's given a fresh glimpse of the sovereignty of God in much the same way that John, in the book of Revelation sees a throne and there is someone who is sitting on that throne. God is great.

Now this can be extrapolated along several lines here spatially, spatially. He sees God high and lifted up. It's as though his very neck is contorted as he endeavors to raise his eyes to glimpse this majestic sight that he sees in the temple. God is enthroned. As the psalmist says, “He is enthroned on the praises of His people.” And Isaiah is stretching to catch and take in the sheer magnificence of this vision. It is both intimidating and terrifying. The very ground beneath is shaking like an earthquake. We can think of it in terms of sensation because his very senses feel the presence of God. It is though he is almost suffocating because this temple is now filled with smoke. And psychologically, as the train, as the hem of God's robe fills the entire temple itself and he feels as it

were, God overpowering him and pursuing him and audibly hears music like he'd never heard before.

Seraphs, these created beings with six wings singing, "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth is full of Your glory!" They have six wings. With two they cover their faces. These are un — they have never sinned. They are sinless beings. These are beings not subject to the fall. These are beings who don't trace their lineage to Adam in the Garden. These are sinless creatures. They are holy creatures in themselves but even they in their createdness shun their gaze from the presence, the intimidating presence of the holiness of God. With two of their wings they cover their feet by which I understand in so doing they're covering their bodies as though they're saying in effect that all the glory is God's and not theirs. Imagine, imagine seeing a seraph. Imagine — one day, one day I do hope I'll see a seraph, a cherub of two-wings. They fly like celestial humming birds, whirring as they do so, in the very presence of God as though they were saying they were ready to go wherever God asked them to go. He's seeing this extraordinary sight of the holiness of God.

Our God is too small. That's our problem. That's our fundamental problem. Our God is too small. And this vision, as John's vision in the apocalypse, this vision is saying, "Lift up your heads, lift up your eyes, and behold the greatness, the staggering greatness of God." God is representing Himself here in terms that you and I can understand though barely. This is God using baby talk. God who has no body is making Himself known to Isaiah in a way that he can begin at least to understand and fathom. And the messages — "I am holy. I am holy." And even the seraphs, created and derived as they are but sinless, even the seraphs hide their faces from Him.

## **II. A vision of God's judgment.**

But then secondly we're given a vision of God's judgment, of God's judgment. This throne that Isaiah sees is a throne from which God issues His judgment upon His sinful people. That's why the place totters. That's why it's filled with smoke. They are symbols, do you see, of the visitation of God's judgment upon His people. Psalm 18 — "The earth shook and trembled at the presence of God." And what happens? It is in the temple that this manifestation takes place. Judgment begins in the house of God, that's what it's saying. That's a foretaste of what happens when God's judgment comes. It breaks forth from the house of God and in the direction of the family of God. Isaiah himself felt it. "I am a man of unclean lips," he said, "in the presence of holiness." He felt its judgment. If you had met Isaiah in the streets of Jerusalem he was a well-known figure. Everyone knew who Isaiah was — this prophet who kept on preaching. If you had met Isaiah you would have said, "He's got the cleanest lips in Jerusalem. He's a holy man. He's a godly man." But before the presence of the holiness of God, the prophet says, "I am a man of unclean lips." This sovereignty, this holiness,

undoes him. It undoes him. It brings forth from within him a confession of his unworthiness, of his sinfulness, of his wretchedness.

And all around him Isaiah is surrounded by people who know the Scriptures, as Ligon was saying this morning, and there are so many ties between that passage and this passage and the first chapter of Isaiah in particular. He's surrounded by people who know the Scriptures and know the blessings that God gives to His people, but they know nothing of sin. They know nothing of sin. They've never confessed their sins and they've never repented of their sins. And Isaiah discovered, do you see, that God is never more God-like than in the way He brings His judgments.

Do you remember in Romans chapter 1, Paul is describing the various sins of first-century Roman civilization and he says, "That is the judgment of God." You're expecting bolts to come out of heaven and Paul is saying, "No, God has given them over to these sins. That is God's judgment." And these people are boasting, they are boasting in the Word of God and God's judgment is, "You can have the Word of God but you cannot understand it," because without the blessing of God you cannot understand the Word of God. And Isaiah must perform his ministry, preaching and teaching, but with this knowledge that those to whom he preaches and those to whom he teaches would never come to an understanding of the Word of God. He gives them over to what they've asked for. He gives them over to their sinful disposition.

Now my friends, this is saying many things to us, but it is saying at least this: that God is not tame. God is not to be trifled with. God is not some divine Father Christmas who gives blessings to little children because that's what He is and that's His character. It is, listen to me my friends, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

### **III. A vision of God's grace.**

But there's a third thing here. Not only a vision of God's holiness and a vision of God's judgment, but there is also here a vision of God's grace. There's a vision here of the Gospel because from the altar, one of these seraphs with the tongs — it's incredible. A live coal from the altar of sacrifice where sacrifice was made, where blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins, one of these seraphs brings a live coal and touches Isaiah's lips, those lips of which he had said, "I am a man of unclean lips." And at that very point God comes in forgiveness, in atonement, in reconciliation. There's mercy with this God, this holy God, this righteous God, this sovereign God, this great God, this intimidating God. There is mercy with this God.

Now I wish I had time, but if you read through John chapter 10 you will discover something quite extraordinary, that the one whom Isaiah saw in the temple that

day in all of His intimidating glory was Jesus. It was Christ that he saw, a theophany of Christ, an Old Testament appearance of Christ. This in an intimation of the Gospel, that forgiveness comes but it comes only on the other side of propitiation of the wrath and judgment of this holy God. Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission.

My friends, there are so many lessons here but let me at least get one of them out. Like Isaiah, you may have been a believer for a long time, and like Isaiah, you need a fresh glimpse of the holy character of God because, this is the point, you will never appreciate the Gospel in all of its glory and splendor. You'll never appreciate what forgiveness really means unless you appreciate the holy character of God, the cost of that forgiveness, the cost of that forgiveness.

You see, greatest usefulness in the kingdom of God comes on the other side of this glimpse of the holy character of God. Greatest usefulness comes on the other side of the sheer cost of the Gospel that forgives. There is forgiveness with God. No, we can say that too easily. There is forgiveness with God, with this God, there is forgiveness with God that He may be feared. What a wonder. What glory, what blessing that is.

Let's pray.

*Father we have barely scratched the surface of this passage but we want to thank You and bless You that there is forgiveness with You that You may be feared. Help us to walk in Your ways and fear Your great name, assured of forgiveness in the blood of Christ that cleanses us from all sin and propitiates Your holy character. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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