

Holy, Holy, Holy

Isaiah 6:1-7; 1 Peter 1:13-21

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

When the prophet Isaiah was called to the ministry, he was given a vision of God in his heavenly court. He 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 with six wings: with two they covered their face, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another, and this is what they said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

And when the apostle John was in the Spirit, and saw a door standing open in heaven, he saw a throne standing in heaven, with one seated on the throne in radiant splendor. Surrounded by the 24 thrones of the elders.

And from the throne, came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder. And before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God.

And also before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, were four living creatures, and like Isaiah’s seraphs, each of them with six wings, they are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say:

*“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”*

Isaiah, and later, John. Two prophets for whom heaven was unveiled. And in both cases, the fiery beings are worshipping by celebrating ONE – that’s it --- One-- attribute of God – his holiness.

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. In heaven, day and night, they NEVER cease to say this. NEVER. All two-line holiness chants. All the time. Forever. This is what we would call today a boring, predictable, repetitive liturgy. But these fiery, burning beings are not bored, they are not tired. They don’t find this infinite, unending hymn to be monotonous – they don’t feel the need to introduce some variation, lest it become rote repetition.

Like Chesterton said about God summoning the sunrise every morning: it's not a monotonous repetition, it's an encore. Same here, each chanted chorus is new and fresh and vital and alive, and each calls forth the next in a never-ending string of encores. This is what a vision of the holy God evokes. Holy. Holy. Holy.

Note: In heaven they are NOT chanting: Loving, Loving, Loving is the Lord God Almighty. Nor are they chanting True, True, True is the Lord God Almighty. Nor are they saying Good, Good, Good or Faithful, Faithful, faithful is the Lord God Almighty.

What is supremely, perpetually, eternally, praised in heaven, is the holiness of God. And the three-fold repetition (Holy, Holy, Holy) is a superlative. That is, it is a way of highlighting the total, super-abundant fulness of holiness which characterizes the Triune God. Such is the importance of our theme this morning. We will, then, try to peer into this holiness under three headings. Holy God, Holy Redeemer, and Holy People.

I. Holy God

First, then, holy God. Holiness is really hard to grasp. In one sense its everything we need to say about God. Thus, the heavenly worship is condensed into this one theme. One does not have to read Scripture long to realize it has a unique and a privileged place among the attributes.

J.I. Packer called it the attribute of attributes. All other attributes are like riffs on, or implications of, his holiness. It has been called the sum of his attributes, the harmony of all his perfections, the foundation of all his virtues. Uniquely representative of his essence. Stephen Charnock says: If any, this attribute has an excellency above his other perfections. It is, he says, the splendor of every attribute in the Godhead.

Others have called it the essential glory of the divine nature, the luster and varnish of all his excellencies. Edwards speaks of it as God's beauty. The point is there something fundamental, something pervasive and singular, about this attribute, which seems to qualify all the rest. It has, if you will, the pre-eminence among the attributes.

There are a number of ways of seeing this pre-eminence. For example, God's name is qualified by the adjective holy (holy God, holy Lord, holy one of Israel) God is described with this adjective – holy – more than with all other adjectives combined. Indeed it is as Triune, as Father, Son and Spirit, that God is the holy One. Jesus calls his Father "holy Father." And – stunningly – John tells us in his gospel, that when Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, he saw Christ. He is the holy Son of God, conceived and guided by the Spirit, who is called holy over 100

times. Thus, we speak, rightly, and in a profoundly Christian way, when we speak of the Holy Trinity.

This One's name is holy, he swears by his holiness, his throne is holy, his angels are holy, his sanctuary is holy. We have a holy mountain, a holy city, a holy people, a holy day, a holy land, holy Scriptures. His presence infuses everything with holiness. In fact, the first use of holiness is in Exodus 3 where God appears and speaks to Moses out of the burning bush – and this strange presence requires the removal of Moses' sandals, for the ground is now holy ground. And yet-- we still haven't defined it.

In one sense, it is just identical with God himself. Holy IS He (Psalm 99). It is a way of expressing the God-ness of God. His name. Holy IS his name. God doesn't have holiness-- he is holy. He is the unique One. But we can say more. We can attempt a definition. The root meaning of the Hebrew word for holy is separation. And we can think of this separation in two ways. Metaphysically and morally.

Metaphysically – meaning having to do with the relation between God's being and all created being --- here the idea is that God is utterly separate, completely other than us. We spoke of this earlier in this series. God is in no class. He is incomparable. He dwells in inaccessible light. He lives from and by himself, he is independent. He is utterly, infinitely, transcendent – above – his creation. Thus Scripture regularly says God is lofty, or high, or the “Most High,” the exalted One, enthroned on high. And this lofty enthronement, this transcendence, is directly linked to his being holy. Here's Psalm 99:

The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth-quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he!

“Holy” means he is the unique, unmatched majestic king, high above all. Thus, Exodus 15 says: Who is like you? O Lord, Majestic in holiness. This strange and alien, radical difference, this separation between him and anything else. That is metaphysical holiness. But “separation” also can be viewed morally. Holiness, then, is God's unvarnished, blinding purity. His fiery moral excellence. His infinite hatred of all sin and evil. His love of all that is good and excellent. His ethical perfection. His uncompromised and uncompromisable integrity. His flawless moral grandeur.

He is, in the words of Charles Hodge (19th c. Princeton), absolutely pure, free from all limitation in his moral perfection. Thus, his eyes, the prophet Habakkuk says, are too pure to even look on evil. And it is this combination, of transcendent otherness, and moral splendor, which make encountering this God – without a mediator – something like tasting the raw edge of terror. Thus, Isaiah is undone, and cries “woe is me.” To see this God is to die. It is to be consumed. Thus, the

seraphs cover their eyes. John falls down as if dead. But the heavenly chant continues forever: holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty.

II. Holy Redeemer

Secondly, then, Holy Redeemer. God's holiness does not stay locked up in his own being, his separateness does not mean he does not draw near to save. After all, He speaks of himself as the "Holy One --- in your midst." The Holy One OF ISRAEL or OF JACOB. Here's Isaiah 12:

*Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

This means that in addition to his otherness --- holiness is a mode (a way) of relating to his creation. Thus, the holy One --- and this is such good news -- the holy One is our Redeemer, our Savior. Isaiah --- who saw this terrible holiness --- repeatedly affirms this.

*Isaiah 41: Fear not, I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord;
your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah 43: For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

Holiness does NOT drive God away from us. It defines how he relates to us who are unholy. This is a holiness which draws near in judgment and grace. There is no doubt, that as Isaiah and John found out, that it can be traumatic. But it is saving trauma. It is an undoing which leads to wholeness. Negatively, this holiness destroys. It is destructive of wickedness. For sin attacks our flourishing and our well-being. And that is why God is implacably opposed to it -- not because he's some cosmic moralist. Positively, this holy fire purifies, sanctifies, purges and beautifies -- in short, it glorifies the human creature.

And again, it is the Triune God who is our Holy Savior and Redeemer. It is the God and FATHER (Father) of our Lord Jesus Christ, who elects us (Eph. 1 says) with the goal that we would be HOLY and blameless before him. It is the Son who loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. And it is the Spirit -- the HOLY Spirit, who applies this redemption to unholy creatures. Who builds us -- US ---into a dwelling place for the Holy God in the Spirit (as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2).

Thus, as Edwards puts it: as there is an infinite fountain of holiness, moral beauty, and excellence, so it should flow out in communicated holiness. That simply means that because God himself is our end, our vocation, our goal, this holiness of God is to become reflected in us. For this, the Father elects, the Son

sheds his blood, and the Spirit sanctifies. For there shall be holy communion between the Holy Trinity and a holy people. And that brings us to the third point – a holy people. Because God is this Triune God, the Holy One in our midst, he can state his sovereign purpose succinctly (Lev. 19): You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

And the apostle Peter echoes this when he writes (NT Lesson): *As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written: You shall be holy, for I am holy.* There it is. Christian ethics in 8 words. 23 letters. You shall be holy, as I am holy.

And here we are driven to the cross of Jesus. For that cross is necessitated by the collision of God's infinite flame of holiness, and our malignant sinfulness. One of our hymns says: the deepest stroke that wounded him, was the stroke that Justice gave. Charnock says that, if it's the stroke that Justice gave, it's the stroke that holiness ordered. Holiness is, if you will, secured for us by the flawless obedience of Christ, in life and death. For we were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

This One, our high priest, is holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and now exalted above the heavens. He is holiness in human flesh. And he has now reconciled us, in his body of flesh, by his death, in order to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

The way of holiness then is the way of the cross. The way of putting to death sin and being quickened and made alive in Christ. Mortification (death) and vivification (new life). Union with Christ in his death and in his resurrection. *For we have been chosen, we have been called and justified, Romans 8 says, that we might be conformed to the image of Christ.*

He who is our righteousness, is our sanctity, our holiness as well, for he is a complete Savior. Not one of his sheep shall fall short of the splendor of the image of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, the holiness of God is eminently practical. We are to be in earnest about becoming holy. For there is only one tragic thing in life – and it is not suffering or death or disease or defeat – it is not to become a saint. Thus, we are to purify ourselves AS he is pure. This is to be our singular passion. For at the heart of Christian prayer, is that the name of God be hallowed, and that prayer is a petition above all that it be hallowed in us.

So we are to, in the language of Hebrews 12, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Notice the word strive. Pursue. Chase. Run after. Notice the stakes: without it, NO ONE will gaze on the splendor of the Holy One. The pure in heart, blessed are they, for they alone shall see the Holy One and live.

To conclude: Because the thrice-holy God is our end, the pursuit of God is, for us, the pursuit of holiness. For this is the will of God, your sanctification. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. For the sum of Christian ethics – you shall be holy, as I am holy. Is, in a fact a promise, a promise of everlasting holy fellowship in glory.

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. So we pray the apostolic benediction for ourselves and for each other: Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. For then, when he appears, we shall see him as he is, and we shall join the unending choir of fiery seraphs singing: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Amen.

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