

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 20, 2007**

## **THE HOLINESS OF GOD**

### **Isaiah 6:1-8**

In 1990, Christian songwriter Michael W. Smith released a crossover hit called “A Place in This World.” The lyrics go like this:

The wind is moving, but I am standing still  
A life of pages waiting to be filled  
A heart that's hopeful, a head that's full of dreams  
But this ‘becoming’ is harder than it seems

If there are millions, down on their knees  
Among the many, can you still hear me  
Hear me asking “Where do I belong?”  
“Is there a vision that I can call my own?”

I'm looking for a reason  
Roamin' through the night to find  
My place in this world, my place in this world  
Not a lot to lean on  
I need your light to help me find  
My place in this world, my place in this world<sup>1</sup>

Do those words resonate with you? Do you hunger for a purpose, for a place in this world that is connected to what God is doing? You know, as Christians we are supposed to be engaged in God's business. We know we should be witnesses of His compassion. We should talk to people about Christ, we should serve in the life and ministry of the church; we should be about the business of evangelism and discipleship and Christian service through our work and our words – not just every now and then, but as a way of life.

But serving the Lord does not come easy. We often feel inadequate and unprepared to do anything directly related to God. The baggage from our past mistakes weighs us down. We feel that our lives are too messed up, too out of order to be about the Lord's work! Even when we are willing to serve the Lord, it seems impossible when people seem to be growing further away from Him.

We want to live according to God's purposes for our lives, but the idea seems all but impossible. Every day we sin, and so does everybody around us. If you are sometimes discouraged with these feelings, you are like me. Together we are like the Old Testament prophet Isaiah – we need to focus on the holiness of God. Let's take a few moments to understand what God revealed to Isaiah in His Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael W. Smith and Wayne Kirkpatrick. “Place in This World,” 1990.

## **THE VISION OF GOD'S HOLINESS**

Isaiah's vision was probably of Solomon's temple, built in about 1000 B.C. as a visible symbol of the Lord's divine presence with Israel. At its dedication, the glory of the Lord came down in the form of a cloud and filled the temple. The temple building itself had an innermost section called the "Most Holy Place" or the "Holy of Holies." There was placed the Ark of the Covenant, that beautiful chest holding the Ten Commandments, Aaron's staff and a jar of manna. On top of the ark was the "mercy seat," actually a symbolic throne for God. The "Holy of Holies" was never entered by a human being, except the high priest and then, only once a year on the Day of Atonement. I believe that Isaiah's vision was of the Lord sitting upon the mercy seat in this temple room.

What did Isaiah see in the temple? He "saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple." Look in your Bibles at how the word *Lord* is printed in verse one. It begins with a capital letter and then is finished with lowercase letters. "Lord" translates the Hebrew word *Adonai*, the word for God that refers to His sovereign rule over His creation. *Adonai* is not the name of God. It is a title for God, indeed the supreme title given to God in the Old Testament – *Sovereign One*. The all-capitalized "LORD" in verse three is the Hebrew word *Yahweh* (or Jehovah) and is the name God used for Himself.

*Adonai, Sovereign One*, is on the throne! The train of His robe fills the temple with incomparable splendor! Picture this for a moment as if the Lord appeared this way in our sanctuary. His robe would gather around the steps and the platform, it would fill the aisles and cover the table and seats and everything here. It is an incredible image and points to the fact that God is all powerful. He is on the throne.

And the throne of his authority is not simply one among many – it is high and lifted up. Nothing can nullify the decrees of God. What He chooses to do, He accomplishes. *Adonai, Sovereign One!*

Please let this vision of God capture your imagination for a moment. This would be an awesome experience. We couldn't leave it alone. As John Piper wrote, "To be gripped by the sovereignty of God is either marvelous because He is for us or terrifying because He is against us. Indifference to God's sovereignty simply means we haven't seen it for what it is. The sovereign authority of the living God is a refuge full of joy and power for those who keep his covenant."<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah continues: "Above Him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying." What a spectacular but curious sight. Angelic beings called *seraphim* (burning or fiery ones) because they shined brightly, though they were pale in comparison to the glory of the Lord. Seraphim were created uniquely for the worship and adoration of God. They have three wings: one pair for flying, a second pair to prevent a blinding gaze on the glorious face of God, and a third pair to cover their feet in acknowledgment of their status as created beings.

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Is the Lord of Hosts" sermon, January 1, 1984. <<http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons>>).

Of course, it is what these seraphim have to say that gets Isaiah's attention! In fact it causes the doorposts and thresholds of the temple to shake! "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory." Three times the word *holy* is sung in an antiphonal chorus – "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

Don't miss the importance of this. In Hebrew poetry, repetition is a means of emphasis. Like our underlining important words, printing them in italics or using exclamation marks. The Jews used repetition often – you'll find many examples in Scripture. But as R.C. Sproul tells us in his classic work, *The Holiness of God*, "only once in Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of His glory."<sup>3</sup>

So what does the Bible mean when it says God is holy? To be holy means to be set apart, distinct and separate from the common and ordinary. At one level it refers to God's power and sovereignty. At another, holiness means the Lord's perfect moral goodness – He is without evil, He does nothing wrong. But God's holiness is more than that. Listen to how John Piper wrestled with the term:

Every effort to define the holiness of God ultimately winds up by saying: God is holy means God is God. Let me illustrate. The root meaning of holy is probably to cut or separate. A *holy thing* is cut off from and separated from common (we would say secular) use. Earthly things and persons are holy as they are distinct from the world and devoted to God. So the Bible speaks of holy ground, holy assemblies, holy sabbaths, a holy nation, a holy city, holy men and women. Almost anything can become holy if it is separated from the common and devoted to God. But notice what happens when this definition is applied to God Himself. From what can you separate God to make him holy? The very god-ness of God means that He is separate from all that is not God. There is an infinite qualitative difference between Creator and creature. God is one of a kind. He is in a class by Himself. In that sense He is utterly holy. But then you have said no more than that – He is God."<sup>4</sup> ("Holy, Holy, Holy, Is the Lord of Hosts" sermon, January 1, 1984).

God is God. He is the Sovereign One. Isaiah would later write "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." The Lord is holy, holy, holy.

### **THE RESPONSE TO THE VISION**

When Isaiah saw the Lord of glory displayed before his eyes, he cried out "Woe to me! I am ruined." This is what I call the understatement of the Bible. To be ruined means to be destroyed,

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<sup>3</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*. Tyndale, reprint. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Piper, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

unraveled, disintegrated. Under the absolute standard of God's holiness, Isaiah was destroyed – morally and spiritually annihilated. He was undone.

What was the reason for Isaiah's sense of ruin? The prophet gives us an answer: "For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Unclean lips! Dirty mouths! Jesus said in Matthew 15:18-20: "But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean.'" This is a way of expressing the sinfulness of the human heart.

Think about that for a moment. The very mouths that offer praises to God, sing His chorus and songs from hymnbooks, or preach His Word, will go home today and speak idle and unkind words. We'll complain, we'll grumble, we'll speak our mind and say words that fail to build one another up and refuse to honor the Lord. We are a people of unclean lips!

Thankfully, God's holiness is demonstrated not just in His anger toward sin, but by His love and grace. The Lord reacts immediately to Isaiah's confession. "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'" The seraph took a glowing coal and pressed it to Isaiah's lips. The stone cauterized Isaiah's lips and burnt away the dirt.

There was a special significance for Isaiah. The coal seems to have had an important symbolic connection to the Jewish festival called *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. According to Leviticus 16, on that day the high priest would sacrifice a calf and a goat to ransom the sins of Israel. He would enter the Holy of Holies and would sprinkle the blood from the sacrificed animals. The death of these animals served as a ransom for the people of Israel – the life of the animal in place of the lives of the worshippers. But before he would sprinkle the blood, the high priest took coals from the altar and burnt incense in the Most Holy Place, filling the room with smoke as a symbolic reminder of the sacrifice which had just been made.

Isaiah would have understood the symbolism. The seraphim took a coal from the altar, where a sacrifice had been made. In that room filled with the glory of God, he applied that sacrifice and ransomed Isaiah from his sin.

But there is more for us. We know that the coal, just like the Day of Atonement, symbolizes the work of Christ on the Cross. It is not a coal that saves Isaiah. It isn't the sacrifice of an animal on an altar. For Isaiah, like us, redemption comes through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. Listen to Hebrews 9:11-14.

When Christ came as High Priest of the good things that are already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having

obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

Did you get that? Jesus Christ is both the High Priest and the sacrifice. Because the Lord is holy, He cannot condone sin – any compromise with unholiness would destroy the very nature of His holiness. Something holy, something (or someone) set apart and divine is needed as a substitute in order to pay the price and deal with our unclean hearts. A calf, or a goat, or sinful human beings, will not do. But because Jesus Christ is holy – morally perfect and unblemished – He is qualified to step into the Most Holy Place for us, to stand before His Father and do something about our sin.

The Cross is the supreme demonstration of God’s holiness! And why does Jesus do this? “To cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”

### **THE REASON FOR THE VISION**

Now, for the first time in Isaiah’s vision, God speaks. God speaks to a man who has been cleansed of his sin. The holy Triune Lord – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – speaks to a man who has been made holy. “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’” They are words given to someone sent on a mission, someone with a purpose. He has been given a message – the message of God.

Isaiah would continue as the Lord’s spokesman. He would serve God for over half a century or more, through the reigns of three other kings – Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Why? Because God had cleansed him. He was set apart as God’s man, a holy prophet. God revealed His holiness to Isaiah so that he might see himself clearly, experience real forgiveness, and become fully capable of serving Him.

Isaiah’s response was one of gratitude, thankful for what his holy God had done. “Here am I. Send me!” As Sproul describes, it is not “Here I am,” which would merely indicate his location, but, “Here am I.” Isaiah is stepping forward to volunteer. His answer is “I will go. Look no further. Send me.”<sup>5</sup>

You and I are given the same privilege. God brings His holiness to our attention so that we can really experience forgiveness and serve Him. Each of us hungers for a place in this world that relates to God’s holy purposes. The Lord, in His holiness, has made that possible. Through the Cross of Jesus Christ He has ransomed us. We are set apart by Him to serve. Despite our feelings of discouragement or inadequacy, or the guilt from our past mistakes and sins, the Cross has set us free. He has taken the coal, pressed it to our lips and made our dirty mouths clean!

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<sup>5</sup> Sproul, *Holiness of God*.

We have no reason to fear the work of evangelism, discipleship and Christian service. We have no reason to shrink from God's business. As holy people who continually reflect on the holiness of God, serving the Lord will increasingly become natural to us.

Spend time each day learning more and more about this majestic God we worship. Discover anew His wonder and power and grace. Get to know the Sovereign One, the one who is called Holy, Holy, Holy!

God reveals His holiness not to terrify us, but to redeem us. He shows us His holiness so that we can really experience His forgiveness.

He shows us that He is a holy God so that we can serve Him.