

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 9, 2011**

**THE MEANS OF GRACE:
WORSHIP**

Isaiah 6:1-8

INTRODUCTION

As God has spoken to us from His Word in recent weeks, we have been reminded to:

1. “Gird up the loins of (our) minds,” meaning, to be alert and ready at every moment to spring into action as God shows us what He wants us to do (1 Peter 1:13).
2. Be self-controlled in every area of life, because you cannot serve God’s purposes when you are out of control (1:13).
3. Set our hope for this life and for eternity fully on the grace of God and the God of grace (1:13).
4. Live a holy life, no longer living the way we used to before we came to faith in Christ and began to follow Him (1:14-16).
5. Live our lives as strangers here on earth with a deep consciousness of God (1:17), knowing that this world is not our home, for our true citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20) and our highest allegiance is to the kingdom of God.
6. Love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22). There is never a time when it is not time to love one another as Jesus loved and loves us still. A little girl whose name I don’t remember, said: “If you love someone, hurry up and show it.” There is never a time when it is not time to love one another with the love of Jesus, and to show it. Friends, God wants us to love one another. Deeply. From the heart. And to show it.

The Lord has also spoken to us about how He uses His Word itself (2 Timothy 3:14-17) as a means of grace, a divinely-ordained instrument to help us better understand and more fully experience His grace, along with other means of grace, such as prayer (Hebrews 4:16; Luke 11:5-13), the Lord’s supper (Matthew 26:26-30), and the grace of forgiveness – the grace we experience in being forgiven, and the grace we extend in forgiving others (Luke 6:37-42).

Today I want you to consider with me what God’s Word teaches us about the nature of true worship, and how worship is a platform on which God’s grace is showcased. Let’s look together at Isaiah 6:1-8, and give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

IN THE YEAR UZZIAH DIED

“In the year that King Uzziah died,” Isaiah had a vision in which he saw the Lord (Isaiah 6:1). You can read about Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26 and 2 Kings 15 (where he is called Azariah). Uzziah had a long reign as the king of Judah. At the death of his father Amaziah, he became king at the age of 16, and reigned for 52 years. It was a period of economic prosperity for the

nation, and Uzziah proved to be a good military leader. The Scripture says that, at first, Uzziah was a good king who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:4). Sadly, Uzziah is just one in a long line of leaders in history who started well, but did not finish well. “After Uzziah became powerful,” the Scripture says (2 Chronicles 26:16), “his pride led to his downfall.” In his arrogance, “he was unfaithful to the LORD” and defiantly tried to usurp the role of the high priest in the temple. He was struck with leprosy, with which he suffered until the day he died (26:19-21). For much of his life, Uzziah did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord. But then he turned away from God. How sad. How tragic.

The death of Uzziah, which took place around 740 BC, marked the end of an era of unusual stability and prosperity for the nation of Judah. For those of us who can remember it, there is a sense in which the death of President John F. Kennedy marked the end of an era. For many Americans, the election of an African-American to the presidency signifies the end of one era and the beginning of a new era. Because of his technological genius exhibited in his invention of the Mac, the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad, many in our culture may point to the death of Steve Jobs this past week as the end of an era, too.

SEEING THE LORD

Uzziah’s death marked the end of an era. But in the year that Uzziah died, something happened to Isaiah that enabled him to put the king’s death in proper perspective (Isaiah 6:1): *Isaiah saw the Lord*, seated on His throne, high and exalted, in the fullness of His unimaginable glory, reigning as the true Sovereign over all nations, all earthly rulers and powers, all peoples – over everything and every inch everywhere in the whole universe.

Isaiah saw angels, too. They are called seraphs, which means “burning ones,” in verse 2. The seraphs are there to serve God continuously, and they never tire of announcing the holiness of God and His magnificent glory displayed in creation. God is not just holy, they declare. He is “holy, holy, holy” (6:3). As Ray Ortlund, Jr. and others have pointed out, this is not like simple addition. It is not like adding 1+1+1 to arrive at the sum of the holiness of God. It is more like the exponential multiplication of the ultimate measure of holiness or moral perfection which we can conceive of in our minds. It is not holiness or perfection times three. It is perfection of holiness times the perfection of holiness times the perfection of holiness all the way to infinity and beyond. That is what the seraphs proclaim, and what Isaiah glimpsed when he saw the Lord.

The seraphs also declare that the whole earth is full of God’s glory (6:3). David says in Psalm 19 that “the heavens declare the glory of God” (19:1). We can say “Amen” to that, even if our perception of His glory, like the sky itself, is clearer on some days than others. But here the angels announce that His glory is everywhere present in our world. We may not be aware of His glorious presence very often as we go through our daily routines. We are too often consumed with our own selfish concerns or petty ambitions. But, as Ortlund says, “The truth is, God not only *deserves* to reign supreme, He *does* reign supreme. And His reign is glorious.” I need to be reminded of this, and maybe you do, too. God reigns, and His reign is glorious, as Isaiah understood as never before when he was given this vision of the Lord.

Let me ask you: Have you ever seen the Lord? Have you ever had a vision like Isaiah? I have not. Have you ever seen an angel, or angels plural? A few Sundays ago, as we were singing the song “Holy Ground,” with the lines “We are standing on holy ground, and I know that there are angels all around,” I was praying with my eyes open: “Lord, please let me see the angels. I want to see the angels. I believe the angels are here. Forgive me for having such a weak faith. Would you let me see the angels?”

I didn’t see the angels that morning. I haven’t seen the angels yet. But Isaiah saw them. And not only the angels, he saw the Lord Himself. It was a vision Isaiah would never forget. How could you ever forget something like that?

THE EFFECT OF SEEING GOD

How do you think you would respond if you were to see God as Isaiah did? What kind of effect do you think it would have on you? It had a profound and disturbing effect on Isaiah, didn’t it? Seeing God in His sovereign majesty and, even more, in the magnificence of His absolute holiness caused Isaiah to see the filthiness of his own heart. It caused him to despair of any hope. He said: “Oh, no. Woe is me! I’m finished. I’m doomed. It’s all over for me. I’m toast.” When he saw God, Isaiah was overwhelmed with an awareness of his own sin and unworthiness (6:5).

Isn’t it true that the more clearly we see God as He is, the more clearly we see ourselves as we truly are? The more clearly we see the perfect holiness of God, the more we see how sinful and unholy we are. The closer we walk with God and the more we grow in His grace, the more our own sin grieves us, and the more we realize our need for His grace.

Someone has said it is like having a huge mirror with a big, bright light over it. When you stand at a distance and look in the mirror, what you see may look pretty good: the suit looks like it fits well, the tie appears to be straight, the hair (if you have any) looks fine. But as you get closer to the mirror, you begin to see things you didn’t see from a distance: the suit has a spot on it, not to mention all those dog hairs, the tie is a little wrinkled, and the hair is not all in place. The closer we get to the light, the easier it is to see our defects. The same is true with respect to our relationship to God. When we get close to Him, when we see Him shining in the light of His glory and see ourselves in comparison, we realize what a mess we really are. We realize how far short of the standard of His glorious and perfect holiness we fall. We realize how far we are from Him and how desperately we need Him. (Source: Red Cooper, “Beholding the King,” www.preachingtoday.com)

That is what happened to Isaiah. He was convicted of his sin. He confessed his sinfulness and uncleanness before God. Seeing God in His holiness, Isaiah’s conscience was stabbed with an undeniable awareness of his sin and guilt, and his unworthiness to come into God’s presence. It is not just with his lips that he sinned. Isaiah knew that our lips speak the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. The uncleanness of his lips exposed the uncleanness of his heart. Which is true in our lives, too.

Make sure you don't miss this either: When we forget that God is holy, or we think it is no big deal, or we just rebel against the whole idea of being accountable to God, what happens is that our spiritual sensitivity to sin is dulled, or even killed off. Which, of course, is not a good thing. In fact, it is a terrible thing. A tragic thing. May it never happen to any of us.

CLEANSING FROM SIN

What happens next is all mercy and grace. Pure forgiveness. One of the seraphs takes a live, hot, burning coal from the altar, touches it to Isaiah's mouth, and says: "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (6:6-7). Amazingly, the hot, burning coal doesn't burn Isaiah's flesh. It doesn't hurt him. Instead, it heals him. This burning coal is a foreshadowing of the saving work of Christ on the cross, where the sinless Son of God bore our sins in His body to make atonement for our sins, to take away our guilt, and to make us right with God. When this happens, Isaiah awakens to eye-popping magnitude of God's amazing, redeeming, forgiving, cleansing grace to sinners – grace which comes free of charge to sinners who do not deserve it and never will. Sinners like Isaiah. And me. And you.

Then, as this forgiven sinner stands in amazement at what God in His grace has done for him, Isaiah hears the call of God. He steps forward and says: "Here am I. Take me, Lord. Send me. Use me" (6:8). This is the response of a forgiven and grateful heart to the grace of God. It is only by His sovereign grace that any of us is qualified to go and tell and teach and love and serve in the name of Jesus. It is all by His grace.

If you have experienced His grace, as Isaiah did, if your guilt has been taken away and your sins atoned for through the death of Christ on the cross for you, then God has a purpose for your life and a place for you to serve Him, just as He did for Isaiah. If you're not sure what it is, ask God to show you. As you wait, find a need in the church or community and give of yourself to meet it in the name of Jesus. There is no shortage of needs or opportunities.

WORSHIP AS A MEANS OF GRACE

After all this, if you're wondering what Isaiah's vision of the Lord has to do with worship, specifically, as a means of grace, think about this. The word *worship* comes from an old word that means "worth-ship." Simply put, God deserves our worship because of His worth-ship. Because He is worthy. When Isaiah saw the Lord in His sovereign majesty, in the splendor of His glory and His exponential holiness, he was captivated by God's worth-ship, convicted of his own sin and unworthiness, and delivered from the burden of his sin and guilt by God's grace. When we approach God in humility and trusting faith, when we see God for who He really is and worship Him with an undivided heart and no "just going through the motions," we see the beauty and hear the message of His grace to us more clearly, and His grace cleanses, heals, and gives us strength for today and hope for tomorrow. Grace is central to worship, because grace is central to who God is.

NO PRETENDING

Meryl Streep, the Academy Award-winning actress, is said to have said that “pretending is a very valuable life skill.” For an actor, I’m sure it is. Not for a worshiper of God, though. Pretending in worship is not a skill to be desired or cultivated. God desires and deserves the real thing. God desires and deserves our best in worship. God desires and deserves our full and unhurried attention in worship. Too often too many of us are in too much of a hurry when we come to worship. We have plans, and we are eager to get on with our day. But, dear friends, it is not our day. It is the Lord’s day.

WHOM DO YOU WORSHIP?

As usual, there is more I want to say. But I will close with this, paraphrasing Charles Spurgeon in his devotional book *Morning and Evening*. Spurgeon draws our attention to Isaiah 36:5, where an enemy of God’s people taunts them with the question, “On whom are you depending?” In whom do you trust? In the context of today’s message, we might also ask: Whom do you worship? Paraphrasing Spurgeon:

“This is an important question. Listen to the Christian’s answer, and see if it is yours. The Christian says: ‘I worship a triune God. I worship *God the Father*, believing that He has chosen me from before the foundations of the world; I trust Him to provide for me in providence, to teach me, to guide me, to correct me if need be, and to bring me home to His own house where the many mansions are. I worship *God the Son*. Very God of very God is He – the man Christ Jesus. I trust in Him to take away all my sins by His own sacrifice, and to adorn me with His perfect righteousness. I trust Him to be my Intercessor, to present my prayers and desires before His Father’s throne, and I trust Him to be my Advocate at the last great day, to plead my cause, and to justify me. I trust Him for what He is, for what He has done, and for what He has promised yet to do. And I worship *God the Holy Spirit*. He has begun to save me from my inbred sins. I trust Him to drive them all out. I trust Him to curb my temper, to subdue my will, to enlighten my understanding, to check my passions, to comfort my despondency, to help my weakness, to illuminate my darkness. I trust in Him to dwell in me as my life, to reign in me as my King, to sanctify me wholly – spirit, soul, and body, and then to take me up to dwell with the saints in heaven forever.’

“How blessed we are! To worship and trust Him whose power will never be exhausted, whose love will never wane, whose kindness will never change, whose faithfulness will never fail, whose wisdom will never be confounded, and whose perfect goodness can never decrease. Happy are you, dear friends, if this trust is yours.”

Happy are you if you know Him and worship Him and serve Him with everything you have and everything you are. May you see God as He is and experience the wonder of His grace as you come to worship Him here, and as you worship Him throughout the week. May His grace and peace abound to you as you – as we – give Him the worship He desires and deserves.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.