

Holy Holy Holy

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- [0 : 00] Is that, there we go. Would you open up to Isaiah chapter 6? That'll be the reading this morning, Isaiah chapter 6.
- And we're going to read just the first eight verses of that. I think the reading a few weeks ago was Revelation, so I could kind of easily say, look, just go right to the end.
- And that's the last book. Isaiah is like, I want to say, close to the middle. Maybe have your Bibles if you're struggling to find it. If you hit Jeremiah or Ezekiel, other big prophets, you've gone too far.
- Isaiah is just before them. So Isaiah chapter 6. Hear the word of the Lord as it is written for us in Isaiah chapter 6.
- In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne. And the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings.
- [1 : 11] With two wings they covered their faces. With two they covered their feet. And with two they flew. And they were calling to one another. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.
- The whole earth is full of his glory. At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the thresholds shook. And the temple was filled with smoke. Woe to me, I cried.
- I am ruined. 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.
- Then one of the seraphim 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 is atoned for. And then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send?
- [2 : 14] And who will go for us? And I said, Here I am. Send me. This is the word of God. Let's pray.
- In the words of Isaiah chapter 64, For you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay. You are the potter. We are your work, the works of your hand. We pray this morning, and we come with confidence, knowing that you do not remember our sins forever, but look on us with favor, looking on your people in light of the work of your Son.
- But we do pray this morning, Lord, that you would rend the heavens, that you would come down, that you would meet with us. And that as the mountains tremble before you, so might our hearts do that as well.
- And we pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. You are worthy.
- Maybe you haven't heard that too much from here, but you are worthy. That was the refrain of Oprah's last daytime talk show just over 10 years ago, back when TV shows that streamed every, or didn't stream, came out every week were a thing.
- [3 : 38] You are worthy. Over and over again, Oprah exhorted her crowd, her audience, which was global by that point, with those three words.

You are worthy. Now, I'm not here to bash Oprah, and maybe she's not as big an influence as some have made out, at least not 15 years after her show has stopped airing.

But that mantra-like exhortation that she used, and which in very many ways characterized her show, You Are Worthy, is really synonymous with one of the Gospels of the 21st century.

One of the core tenets of modern faith. One of our most popular and famous creeds, You Are Worthy. Only we don't actually have Oprah to thank for it.

She was merely one of its spokespeople, one of its evangelists, we might say. As one blogger recently put it, to tell someone that You Are Worthy goes back to the 80s and to the 90s, when there was a strong push for a greater self-esteem.

[4 : 52] And it's now become part of our therapeutic culture some 40 years later. And we believe that if you say it enough, if you just say it enough times to others and to yourself, you are worthy that perhaps, perhaps then those feelings that we all have, those feelings of inadequacy, those feelings of lingering guilt for the undeserved blessings and goodness that we enjoy in our lives.

Well, perhaps if I just tell myself enough times I'm worthy, well then those will go away. But I don't think this idea or this notion even goes back to the 80s.

We don't have the boomers or Gen X to thank for it either. See, this insistence of our kind of intrinsic worth and value goes even further back and so too does our own suspicion towards it.

So writing now 200 years ago, in the early 1800s, Mary Shelley, in her book Frankenstein, puts these words on the lips of the monster, Frankenstein's monster.

He's busy learning about human history, about where humans have been and how they've come along. And he's listening and he says this. He says, these wonderful stories and narrations about humanity, they inspire within me strange feelings.

[6 : 20] How was man, he asks, how was man indeed at once so powerful, so virtuous, so magnificent, so wonderful, and yet at the same time, so base, so vicious, so ruinous, so harmful, and so damaged?

The monster goes on. He appeared, now speaking again about mankind, he appeared that man can be conceived as noble and perhaps even godlike, and yet at the same time, responsible for so much hurt, and harm, and malice, and darkness.

And so, as his lesson goes on, and after hearing a little bit more, Frankenstein's monster eventually says, my wonder ceased, and I turned away from mankind with disgust, and with loathing.

Now personally, given to, or owing to her tremendous influence and brilliance, this morning, I'm more partial to Mary Shelley than I am to Oprah.

And if we're honest, it's pretty hard to escape the conclusions that her monster makes. See, regardless of how many times I say to myself, I am worthy, no matter how many times I look in the mirror and try to reiterate and emphasize that we all have that sneaking suspicion, perhaps an overwhelming sense, that we aren't.

[7 : 54] That there is something fundamentally wrong. We've seen how we live, the decisions we make, and though we know these great things about us, on the other hand, we know those darker truths as well.

And so questions arise, and really just two questions this morning, that I think Isaiah 6 answers for us. Firstly, why do we feel like that? Why do we feel like that?

Why does that nagging feeling not go away? Why do I feel this way? And then secondly, where will I find real, lasting worth, and value?

Where is it to be found? So why do I feel that way, and where is it to be found? The answer, as I said, I think comes in Isaiah chapter 6. So you do well to have it open in front of you, and we're going to look at it, I'm going to draw a few points out, and then hopefully answer those two questions.

In chapter 6 of Isaiah, we learn the great cause for those feelings, where they come from, that make us question our value, our significance, and our worth.

[9 : 06] And at the same time, I believe, we see where we can be, or how we can be restored. Where it is we can find significance, and value, and worth, that cannot be taken away, that isn't shaky.

So have a look at Isaiah 6. Isaiah, as you might have seen, as you were trying to paging, and looking for it, it's a long book, okay, one of the longest books, in the Bible.

And Isaiah's ministry, spans something like 50 years, anywhere between 40 and 60 years. So it's a long book, and a long, very detailed ministry. And if you want to know more about that, Stephen said we're studying it, on Sunday nights together.

But essentially, if I could be reductive, Isaiah is sent to the people of God, to Israel, and to Judah, the two kingdoms, and he is sent, with a warning from God, that if they do not turn around, and turn back to worship, the one true and living God, if they do not do that, they will be expelled, from the land, from the land God had given to them, to dwell in.

Isaiah comes with a message, that says, you need to repent, turn back to God, to stay in the land, and to receive his blessing. And in chapter 6, of Isaiah, the prophet recounts, what's considered by most, to be his commission.

[10 : 31] And the striking thing about it, is as we see Isaiah, being, it's like his ordination service, in some ways, as we see him being, prepared to be sent out, to preach, and to teach, in Israel, and we learn a little bit about him, in many ways, we actually learn, the most, about God, in this chapter.

The God who he served, the God who he encounters, in that temple, and who commissions him, with his message. And so it's not really, in the end, a chapter about Isaiah, at all.

But it's about a profound, and transformative encounter, with the living God, which changes the prophet, forever. So have a look at verse 1.

Chapter 6, and verse 1. The prophet, reports, In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne.

The train of his robe, filled the temple. At a point in Israel's life, which would have been, typically destabilizing, with the death of their king, the prophet sees, the true king, seated on his throne, unmoved, and unshaken, eternal, and unchanging.

[11 : 49] Seated on the throne, is the Lord, even though King Uzziah, has died. In verse 2, we see that, ministering to him, are seraphim, heavenly attendants, angels, perhaps, covering their faces, covering their feet, and flying with their other, two wings.

They do not dare, even look, on God. And some people think, they cover their feet, as an indication, that they will not go, their own way, but rather do only, what God says.

They're here, serving to him. And there is a tremendous, reverence, that you can't miss, when you read Isaiah 6. They sing out, or call out to one another, in verse 3. Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, almighty.

The earth, is full, of his glory. And the seraphim's song, I think, is remarkable, for at least three reasons. Three short points, and then, like I said, we're going to get to those, questions.

The first one, is that, in Hebrew, in the Old Testament language, the language of the Old Testament, is written in, in order to make something, emphasize, to emphasize something, or to exaggerate it, the Hebrew simply, repeats words.

[13 : 03] Now, as a Durbanat, I'm a bit of an authority, when it comes to Afrikaans. And I know, that in order, to emphasize something, in Afrikaans, you usually use a superlative, forming word.

Okay, so, like, ice coat. Is that right? I didn't check with anyone, maybe I should have. In, fjur varm. Am I doing alright?

Thanks. I think so, in the front here. Now, that's about the extent, and embarrassing range, of my Afrikaans. I am no specialist, but what Hebrew does, to emphasize something, is to simply just, repeat the word.

And it does this, usually, twice. Or actually, it does this twice, every time, in the Old Testament, except for this, one time, in Isaiah, chapter 6.

It is the only time, in the whole Old Testament, when something is raised, to the power, of three. If we wanted, to say it like that. And this suggests, that there is something more, than God's total, His absolute, His incontrovertible holiness, in view here.

[14 : 09] But actually, something to do, with plurality, and therefore, with personhood. That God is, Father, Son, and Spirit. That God's holiness, is not simply, His otherness, but that He exists, in this community, of holy persons.

God the Father, God the Son, and Holy Spirit. And so, in 6.8, it's no surprise, that God asks, who will go, for us? That leads us, into the second thing, that with this, pronounced holiness, with the superlative use, of the word, holy, we're being told, something about, the whole truth, or nature, and essence, of God.

Holiness, in a sense, accounts for all, of who God is, as Father, and Son, and Spirit. Too often, the word holy, has been taken, not only in Christian circles, and theology, but kind of, across the globe, to mean, just distinction, or, apartness.

It's become, an attribute, of impersonal, mystery, and maybe, otherness. And so, we've, we have this word, transcendence, okay, we've heard that word, transcendence, is a popular word, amongst theologians, and mystics, alike, to make the divine, out, to simply be, away, and inaccessible, and far off.

God is holy. God cannot be, reached. But in our passage, we see, for example, the seraphim, circling God's throne, and worshipping him.

[15 : 46] As I can twice say, look at verse one, and in verse six, I saw, the Lord. Verse six, my eyes have seen, the King.

They've seen, the Lord, Almighty. Now, this isn't, to deny God's, immense, and absolute, holiness. His, his otherness, we, again, we might say, after all, he is the creator.

Everything else, that exists, is something that God, had made, and God gives life to. God is holy. God is set apart, from everything, that we see, and know, including ourselves. Everything, draws its existence, from him.

only God, exists eternally, and gives life, to all things. He is holy, but this holiness is, as one theologian writes, it is a majesty, of singular purity, okay, yes, that God is, in and of himself, okay, something he doesn't share, and yet, in his holiness, God acts, towards, and in the lives, of his creatures.

Let me read that quote, again. God's holiness, is a majesty, of singular purity. There is nothing else, like him. God is holy, holy, holy, and yet, his holiness, or in his holiness, he acts, towards, and in the lives, of his creatures.

[17 : 15] See, God's holiness, drives a sharp distinction, between him, and everything else. Between us, and God, between the creator, and the creation. But at the same time, it explains, God's movement, towards, his creation.

It is because, he is set apart from it, that he can move, towards it. And so, to quote that same, theologian, God's holiness, is a majesty, an incomparable majesty, that is known.

That is manifest, in the works, and in the words, of God. It does not simply mean, that he isn't accessible, but rather, tells us, that he must approach, and does approach us.

Which brings us, to the third thing, and then we're going to get, to those questions. The seraphim call out, the whole earth, is full, of his glory.

Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth, is full, of his glory. And so, God's glory, and his holiness, if it is the whole truth, about him as father, as son, and as spirit, then, it pervades, or it dwells completely, within, the world, that he has made.

[18 : 28] This is why, Paul can write, in Romans chapter one, verses that might be familiar to you, what may be known, about God, is plain. Because God, has made it plain to them, for since the creation, of the world, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power, his divine nature.

These things, have been clearly seen, being understood, from what God, has made, so that people, are without, excuse. God's holiness, God's glory, is evident, for all, to see.

That's Paul's point, in Romans. I think that's what, Isaiah six, is telling us. To come back, to the word holy, the created world, testifies then, to God's majesty. It makes it known.

And it drives that hard distinction, between us and him. Because of everything, that exists, as something God has made, then we find our place, within that. As mere creatures, who depend on him, for everything.

God's holiness, isn't simply, his transcendence, his apartness, but it is, his glory, his total, Godness, if you'll forgive, an odd term.

[19 : 42] And confronted, by that, in Isaiah six, bearing witness to it, in an unadulterated way, the prophet, is bowled over, he's knocked back, he's brought low, not by God's, simple and sheer otherness, but by God's glory, and majesty, his overwhelming, might, and goodness, and beauty, and splendor.

Isaiah beholds the Lord, and is brought low. Have a look at verse four.

At the sound of the seraphim's voices, the doorposts, and thresholds, they shook, and the temple was filled with smoke, and Isaiah cries out, in verse five, woe is me, I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips.

I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. Isaiah realizes who it is, that he is being confronted by, the holy God, the thrice holy God.

And beholding him, he is immediately, disinvested of any ideas, he had of self-importance, or pride. How can he say to himself, I am so worthy, when he beholds the one, who is holy, holy, holy.

[21 : 06] Seeing the God, who made, and sustains all things, the prophet, finds his place. He realizes, who he is, because he understands, who God is.

And I think, again, we can come to this passage, and think that it's just, a matter of a moral reckoning. You know, Isaiah cries out, woe, because I am a man of unclean lips. And sure, that's true, but that's far too narrow, a reading of the passage.

Too diminutive, a view of God's holiness. To understand it simply, that God is holy, and pure, and Isaiah is not. He is sinful. Now that obviously, is what's happening in this passage, or part of it.

But so much more, because he is being confronted, with the living, and the true God. Who is not only goodness, but holiness. Now hopefully, I can illustrate this, but I'm going to issue an apology up front.

My family is reading, the Chronicles of Narnia. So, you're going to hear a bit of, some illustrations from that. And I'm not going to promise, that's the last time I don't use, because it's great.

[22 : 15] You should read it. But the children, when they first meet Aslan, in the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Aslan is the, the kind of Christ figure, in, spoiler alert, in Narnia.

And Lewis writes this. He says, people who have not been in Narnia, sometimes think, that something, or someone, cannot be good, and terrible, at the same time.

When the children, tried to look at Aslan's face, they caught a glimpse, just a glimpse, of his golden mane, and his great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes. And then they found, that they couldn't look, any longer.

And that they were reduced, to trembling, in his presence. Earlier in the same book, and perhaps a little more famously, Mr. Beaver says, that Aslan isn't, safe, but he is, good.

He isn't safe, but good. He is good, and terrifying. He is sheer majesty, to use the words, in Isaiah 6, he is holy, holy, holy.

[23 : 23] This is the experience, of those who've encountered, God. Woe is me, is an appropriate response. And so too is awe, and humility.

To meet someone, who is incomparably, greater, and more glorious. In fact, to meet someone, who sustains, your life, who gave it to you, who holds it.

We can't meet someone, like that, and not be reduced, to worship, humility, praise, and adoration. Listen to these words, from a later point, in Isaiah's ministry.

From Isaiah chapter 40. All people are like grass, and their faithfulness, is like the flowers, of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the Lord, endures forever. Who has measured the water, in the hollow of his hand, and with the breath, of his hand, marked off the heavens, who has held, the dust of the earth, in a basket, or weighed the mountains, on the scales, in a balance.

Surely the nations, are like a drop, in a bucket. They are regarded, as dust on the scales, but the Lord, weighs the islands, as though they were, fine dust.

[24 : 41] The Lord asks, to whom do you, compare me? Who is my equal? The Holy One of God asks, lift up your eyes, to the heavens, who created all of these?

He who brings out, the starry host, one by one, calls forth, each of them by name, because of his great power, and might, and strength, so that not one of them, is missing.

Do you not know? He asks, have you not heard? The Lord, is the everlasting God, the creator, of the ends, of the earth. He does not grow tired, he doesn't grow weary, and his understanding, no one can fathom.

The Lord, is holy, holy, holy, and if you're not brought, low, by your encounter, with him, then you've missed, who he is.

And I think, as a result, will misunderstand, yourself, as well. Isaiah senses, his terrible, unworthiness, when he stands, before the Holy God, before his majesty, that is made known, that is declared, and evident, demonstrated.

[25 : 50] Seeing God, in all his wonder, he can only but say, woe, is me. And yet, there is one more thing, to note, about God's holiness, as we finish. If you can remember, back to my introduction, I asked, why do we struggle, to believe, that we're really, really, really worthy, despite, having been told that, by so many people, and seeing it, on all the, on our influences, and on TV, being told, again and again, trying to have our self-esteem, kind of cobbled together, and built up, you know, by reiterating things, that deep down, we really know, just aren't true.

I think the reason, we feel like that, is because we know, that we are not God. And we've tried so hard, to place ourselves, at the center, of all the things, that we see, as if we were the ones, who gave it, life and existence.

And that's a terrible, terrible burden, to live with, if you aren't him. To try and place myself, at the center, when there is someone, so much greater, and glorious, who truly, inhabits that center, and gives life to all.

And so the last question then, and I said, I'll try and answer this, is that where do we discover, then, value, and worth, and significance, that isn't, that isn't a house, built on sand, that isn't precarious, that doesn't come, and go, ebb, and flow, that doesn't always, give way, to the various realizations, about myself, where do I find, that worth, and that significance?

Have a look at Isaiah 6, verse 6. One of the seraphim, flew to me, with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken, with tongs from the altar, and with it, touched my mouth, and he said, this has touched your lips, guilt is taken away, your sin, is atoned for.

[27 : 52] And then I heard, the voice, of the Lord, saying, whom, shall I send? Who will go for us? And I said, here I am, send me.

Note that once we reach, the end of the section, in verse 8, Isaiah is closer to, and not further from, God. That is, this tremendous, and terrifying encounter, results in him, being drawn, to God.

At first, he is standing, at a distance, in silence, and going, woe, woe, to himself. He sees the robes, still in the temple, and by the end, he is able to hear, the divine musing, whom shall we send?

And is even able, to respond, here I am, send me, I will go. The transformation, of Isaiah, results from him, being reconciled, to God.

Confronted, with his own, unworthiness, and God's, sheer holiness, the prophet, doesn't push down, what he finally realizes, about himself, to be true, but embraces it, and embraces God.

[29 : 08] He doesn't ignore, that nagging, and unnerving feeling, that we all know. The burning coal, is brought from the altar, the place where the, where the sacrifice, is made, where the substitutionary, death, is offered, and is placed, on his lips, and so God's holiness, is satisfied.

See, the seraphim says, verse 7, this has touched, your lips, your guilt is taken away, your sin, is atoned for. Isaiah is standing, then, before God, his worth, his significance, and his value, is not, is not his alone, but something, that is given, by God.

It's not earned, it's a gift. It's credited, to him, it's not inherent, in him. The prophet, doesn't deserve, the place, and yet he gets it, because God, is gracious.

His value, and worth, isn't dug up, from deep inside him, because that's empty. It's poured, onto him, in the gracious love, of God, as his guilt, is taken away, and his sin, is atoned for.

And there's something, very important here, for us to finish on, about the holiness, of God. As his sin, is atoned for, as his guilt, is removed, we're being told, that God simply, doesn't sweep it, under the rug.

[30 : 28] You know, don't worry Isaiah, let's just forget, about it. Years ago, a very influential, pastor, I think he was in the States, preacher, quite carelessly said, that at the cross, God's love, broke, God's law.

That his grace, kind of, swept the decks. But this is to, fundamentally, deny, the holiness, of God. How can a holy God, in all his majesty, and glory, and splendor, just overlook, long running, willful, well documented, rebellion, against him?

That would be, akin to God, simply ceasing, to be God, in order, to forgive, sin. Suspending, his righteousness, and his goodness, in a word, suspending, his holiness, silencing truth, and justice, in favor of love.

This is not how God works, God is holy, holy, holy, holy, holy, and none of that is how atonement is presented in the Bible. Listen to this quote from John Webster, he's a theologian, he writes this, God's holiness, God's holiness, is precisely, that which we see, in God's mercy.

God's holiness, is precisely, what we see, in his mercy. God's holiness, is what we see, in his coming, to aid his people. God's holiness, is what we see, in him taking up their cause, which they are unable to do.

[32 : 04] God's holiness, is him, bearing their sin, so that they do not have to. God's holiness, is him, binding people, to himself, in love.

The holiness, of God, at the cross, is the one place, the one place, where you can go to, and see, a worth that cannot be, shaken, taken away, or lost.

I think we'll sing it later. To one is here, that I confess, my worth, and my unworthiness, the hymn writers, put it.

Like Isaiah, our encounter with God, needn't end, with a woe, is me. Because at the cross, God's holiness, works, for us.

To remove, our guilt, by taking it, on himself. This is the thrice, holy God, acting, for our salvation, to save us, to make atonement, and to invite us, to himself.

[33 : 20] Demonstrating, that while we serve, an incomparably, glorious Lord, his holy love, has made a way. And if that has happened, well then like Isaiah, surely we too, can stand before him, commissioned, transformed, ready to serve him, ready to guide into the world, on his behalf, and secure, in his holy, and great love.

Let's pray. Amen. Lord, in Revelation, chapter 4, we see six, winged creatures, saying day, and night, holy, holy, holy, are you, the Lord God, almighty.

You were, you are, and you are to come. Praising you, oh Lord, the one whose glory, fills the earth, and the heavens.

But Lord, in Revelation 5, we read, that those, six winged creatures, sang, a new song, addressed to the Lamb of Heaven, your Son.

And it goes like this, you are worthy, because you were slain, and with your blood, you purchased, for God, people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation.

[34 : 41] worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive praise, and wealth, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and praise. Holy, holy, holy, are you, Lord God, almighty. Amen.