



The God We Worship, Part 1: He is Holy

Series: The Wonder of Worship

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

AW Tozer once made the accurate observation that the most crucial question before the church is always “Who is God?” And, the most revealing thing about any man or woman is what someone believes God to be like. “Worship,” he said, “is pure or base (corrupt) as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God...always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.” I believe that he is absolutely correct in that assessment. What we believe about who God is and what He is like really does matter. What you believe about who God is -- His character, His nature, His ways, His personality –if you will – and how you respond to that belief will define your life. When we have a biblically faithful, authentic and accurate view of God, we cannot help but be profoundly affected. That is the testimony of every encounter with the Living God that we have recorded for us in Scripture. A true vision of God, a grace-empowered and Spirit-enlightened vision of God, leads to worship, to awe, to reverence, and to a changed life.

But, the converse is also true. A muddled, confused view of God, one that is more informed by tradition or by human wisdom and assumptions about God -- a fallen human view of the character and person of God -- will also leave an indelible mark on the human soul and will lead to a life that is void of real worship and leads to careless, ungodly and insignificant living. Instead of serving the One True God, it will lead to serving a God, who at best, is a mere shadow or, at worst, is a tragic distortion of the God who has revealed Himself in the Scriptures.

If we are going to worship God properly, we have to know the God who is. We must do away with thoughts of God that are too shallow, too superficial and too simplistic and replace them with biblically accurate and theologically rich truth. I trust that none of us here wants a superficial life of shallow worship and fruitless religion. I don’t want that for us. I believe we want a life of rich and meaningful communion with God. And so as we embark on this series on worship – corporate worship, personal worship, and worship as a way of life – the first and

most important thing we need is an exalted and transcendent view of God. And that is going to be the focus of these first few weeks of this sermon series – getting to know God afresh from His Word, beginning with the glorious revelation that the God we are called to worship in spirit and in truth is the three times Holy God. Let’s get into this text today and let’s start by looking at the context for this incredible vision that Isaiah has of the magnificent Holy God.

Setting the Context (v.1) Isaiah writes in verse 1: “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.” (Isaiah 6:1, ESV) Now let’s just stop there for a moment and consider the phrase, “In the year that King Uzziah died...” First off, I want for us to notice that what Isaiah describes for us is a datable event that took place in time and space, an historical event. This isn't a fairytale, this isn't fantasy; it’s not make-believe. It happened. And there is a particular reason that Isaiah has come to the temple that day -- King Uzziah has died.

Now, knowing a little about Uzziah is essential to understanding the timing and the circumstances surrounding Isaiah’s meeting with God. Uzziah came to the throne of Judah when he was only 16 and during his 52-year reign he ushered in a time of peace, prosperity and stability in the nation. Most of the people in Judah had known only his reign. He had undertaken some great building projects, improved agriculture, improved the infrastructure of Jerusalem, routed out the Philistines, and subdued the Ammonites, held the feared Assyrians at bay and, as a result, the people felt safe under Uzziah’s rule. There is a lot to say that is good about Uzziah’s reign, except for one serious blot on his record.

Uzziah forgot his place. 2 Chronicles 16 tells us that when Uzziah "grew strong, he became proud, to his own destruction for he was unfaithful to the Lord His God and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense at the altar of incense." He forgot his and forgot who God was. He presumed to do what only the priests were allowed to do and that was to enter the temple and offer incense before the Lord, to offer up worship – the job of the priests -- in direct contradiction to the revealed will of the Holy God. He sinned against God, specifically in the area of worship. The priests tried to restrain him from doing this but he became angry and indignant. Immediately God struck him with leprosy. He spent his remaining years isolated from the court, living the lonely life of a leper and now he was dead from the complications of the disease and as a result, the wolves, the enemies of Judah, were crouching at the door, looking for an opportunity to attack the nation. It was a troubling time.

Now, here's the thing. Plenty of kings before and after Uzziah had sinned and some of them in pretty awful ways. The main sin, of course, was idolatry. No less than David had committed adultery and murder, but Uzziah was the only one to experience the painful and shameful punishment of leprosy. Why was the sin of Uzziah visited with such swift and severe wrath? What is the big deal? I'll tell you. Uzziah's sin was that he failed to honor God as holy; he brazenly and proudly entered into the Holy Place and didn't offer to God worship, but instead, flouted the law and the holiness of God in God's own sanctuary. He came haphazardly, flippantly, and proudly into the holy presence of God and treated Him and His law regarding worship with utter contempt. He did not fear the Lord. He treated God with indifference and did not follow God's prescribed manners of worship, in God's own temple and God judged Him for it. Does it seem too harsh to you? I have no doubt that Isaiah was troubled, that he was perhaps a little confused and bewildered as to why this had happened to Uzziah and now had resulted in his death. Did God act too harshly? It won't seem that way when you consider the transcendent and burning holiness of God. Isaiah comes to the temple with number of questions, I'm sure, and he gets an answer that he would never forget. He gets...

A Vision of the Holy God (v. 1b-4) Just read this, starting with the last half of verse 1: "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." (Isaiah 6:1b-4, ESV) Words cannot do justice to all that Isaiah saw and heard that day. Nothing like this had ever happened before. God gives Isaiah a view into the very throne room of God and what he sees is awesome. He sees the Holy One, God Almighty, highly exalted, magnificent in His splendor. His glory that fills the temple is overwhelming, to say the least.

He goes to the Temple and he sees that though Uzziah might be dead, the real King in Israel, the King of all creation is very much alive! God is seated upon his throne, THE throne, high and lifted up, the supreme throne, the throne of all rule and power and dominion. "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; And His sovereignty rules over all (Psalm 103:19) The train of His robe, the display of His majesty, fills the temple, overflowing the furniture, covering everything. God is utterly imposing and dazzling in His splendor. That God's train fills the temple speaks of incomparable majesty. Psalm 104: 1-2 gives us this picture: Bless the LORD,

O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. (Psa 104:1-2) Here is the Lord in all of his glory, shining like the sun. His is glorious, imposing and huge.

Above his throne are these created beings, the seraphim, "burning angels." These were the angels that Ezekiel described as having four faces – lion, ox, eagle, man -- who are worshipping and exalting this glorious God. And they cry out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" There is shaking and smoke – all of Isaiah's senses are overwhelmed. His eyes are filled with the splendor of God's glory. He smells and tastes the smoke, feels the quaking of the foundations. The thunderous proclamation of the seraphim is ringing in His ears -- "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" What does it all mean?

Beloved, of all the things that God is, at the very essence of His being, God is holy, holy, holy. The angels surrounding the throne of God call out: holy, holy, holy - not love, love, love or omniscience, omniscience, omniscience, or almighty, almighty, almighty, or mercy, mercy, mercy...but holy. God is infinitely holy, transcendently holy, superlatively holy, unchangeably holy, gloriously holy.

The word "holy" has two distinct meanings. The first, and the primary meaning, is "apartness" or "otherness." To be holy literally means to be separate. When we say that God is holy, we're recognizing that is profoundly different from all his creatures. He has a transcendent majesty, a superiority, which commands our honor, reverence, and worship. When we talk about God's holiness, we are talking about the fundamental characteristic of God. It refers to the reality that God is utterly unique and in a class by himself. None compares with him. There is no other Creator, no other Sustainer of the cosmos and of life, no other final measure of good and evil. He alone is eternal, beyond the categories of space and time, beyond the limitations of all creaturely dimensions. God is truly transcendent, truly other, truly beyond us. God alone is eternal in this uniquely transcendent sense. He is utterly set apart in a class by himself, unequalled, unrivaled, totally underived, and absolute in his being and perfection, without beginning or ending or improvement. His holiness is the supremacy of his infinite worth and transcendent awesomeness among all that is.

The holiness of God is not to be conceived of as one attribute among others; it is the very essence of all that He is. This is His surpassing attribute. It is the glory of all of His perfections. His power is a holy power (Ps. 98:1), His word or promise is a holy promise (Ps. 105:42), His name – who He is -- is a holy name (Ps. 103:1), and His throne, is a holy throne (Ps. 47:8). And so it is with each of God's attributes, His wisdom, knowledge, mercy, grace, love, goodness, etc., all of them are holy, in the sense that God is wise, merciful, gracious, loving and all the rest to a degree that no-one else could ever be.

So when we say that God is holy, first of all, we're recognizing that He is profoundly different from all his creatures. He has a transcendent majesty, an infinite superiority, which merits our honor, reverence, and worship. His holy uniqueness, His holy majesty, rightly understood should cause us to fall to our knees and agree with the angelic hosts: "Holy, Holy, Holy, we have never beheld the likes of you! You are in a category all your own! You are majestic! We are common. You are holy! We are sinful. You are the Creator! We are the creatures. You are worthy!"

But there's another sense in which the word "holy" is used. The Bible also talks about God's holiness in the sense of his purity and righteousness. God can do no wrong. God is completely separated from sin and evil. John writes in 1 John 1:5, "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." He is perfect in holiness. The Holy One is holy with an incomprehensible fullness of purity. He is without shadow or taint, without weakness or blemish; everything He does is perfect and right, just and true. He defines moral and spiritual perfection. His motives are perfect. The sum of all moral excellence is found in Him. He is absolute Purity, unsullied even by the shadow of sin. There is no fathoming, there is no measuring, there is no comprehending, there is no searching, of that infinite sea of moral perfection and righteousness, which is in God. He is morally perfect.

And -- the angels say -- the whole earth is full of his glory! What is the glory of God? The glory of God is simply the manifestation of his holiness. God's holiness is the incomparable perfection of his divine nature; his glory is the display of that holiness. That the "glory of the Lord" fills the earth means that all the evidence of His greatness is around us if we will have the eyes to see. And when the holiness and glory of God is rightly understood and perceived, it produces a profound response in those who see it. And that is what we see here.

We can define the words “holy” and “glory” but I truly believe that holiness and the effect of God’s holiness is something that must be seen. Consider the seraphim and the way they are acting around the throne. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. In the presence of the Holy God, these seraphim cover their faces; they cover their eyes. They cannot and will not look upon God in His splendor. Eyes covered sends a message: it says even we holy creatures who are sinless cannot even look upon the eternal God, for His holiness so exceeds ours that we cannot do it. That’s how holy God is, that these holy creatures won’t even look at Him. The holiness of God is so intense, so burning, that these burning ones (seraphim), these holy and sinless angels won’t even dare to look into the shining face of God. Think about that for a moment. What must that say of the burning, glorious, incomparable holiness of God?

They cover their feet before the Holy God. This may not mean much to us, but it would have spoken volumes to Isaiah who knew that it was the custom that when you would enter into the presence of a king, you would cover feet as you bowed before that king as a show of humility in his presence. In a like manner, the seraphim covered their feet because they realized they were unworthy to be in the presence of this King, in spite of their sinless perfection. So great is the conviction resulting from the holy presence of God that even sinless, perfect creatures feel unworthy before Him.

And they cry to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Back and forth to one another, in unending song, they declare the holiness of God. Why do they do this? It is not because they lack intelligence or lack understanding or creativity, it is because they cannot do anything but be in awe at the holy majesty of God. These are beings that have been in the presence of God since they were created -- for eons and eons if there were time in heaven -- and still they are captivated by the singular holiness -- the glory, majesty, and splendor of God. Great and good as they are, untainted by human sin, they revere their Maker in great humility. They hide themselves in holy fear and reverence from the splendor of God.

Then consider the inanimate temple itself—The sight and sound of God’s holiness in the temple, the vocal praises of the seraphim, cause the posts of the door of the Temple to shake. “And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.” (Isaiah 6:4, ESV) RC Sproul says, “Even inanimate objects have the good sense to be moved by the presence of God.” The temple was filled with smoke: This smoke

reminds us of the pillar of cloud that represented the presence of God (Exodus 13:21-22), the smoke on Mount Sinai that displayed His burning holiness (Exodus 19:18), and the cloud of God's Shekinah glory that filled the temple (1 Kings 8:10-12). It is an awesome sight, terrifying and beautiful to behold at the same time. But the doors of the temple are not the only things quaking. Isaiah is too. Look at Isaiah's

Conviction and Confession (v.5) "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!" (Isaiah 6:5, ESV) Seeing God does not produce ecstasy or hilarity or religious flippancy, not some exclamation of how cool this vision of God is. It produces awe, reverence and terror. Isaiah does not respond with pride, boasting that he alone has experienced this wonderful privilege. Rather he is undone! He sees himself as unspeakably sinful compared to the resplendent purity and transcendence of the King.

The first response to the holiness of God is always an acute awareness of personal sin. When the unholy confronts the holy we become very conscious of our own sinfulness. There is nothing that reveals to us our sinfulness and the seriousness of our transgressions and the filthiness of our iniquities, as does a glimpse of the holiness of God. Isaiah came to offer His praise and worship to God, but he recognizes that he is morally polluted, and his praise will rise to God not as a sweet smelling savor but as a stench. The very vision that inspires Isaiah's desire to worship also reveals his unworthiness to do so.

And Isaiah says, "Woe is me! For I am lost." "I am destroyed. I am devastated by the holiness of God. I'm wiped out. I'm falling apart. I'm coming loose at the seams. I'm disintegrating." Why? Because he saw God, the God of holiness, of holy power, holy perfection, and holy beauty and when he beheld God for the first time in his life he saw himself as he truly was. And he knew how wretched he was. He may have thought himself among the best of men, a spiritual leader, a voice for God, a servant of the Lord. One glimpse of God's holiness and the man was a wretch in his own eyes. He pronounced a "woe," a curse upon himself. It is a pronouncement of judgment. Isaiah also knew that He could not stand to be in God's presence in the condition that he was in. The gulf between God and us is that great.

The person who has no sense of their own sinfulness does not have a true sense of the nature of God. The person who believes they can somehow make themselves acceptable before God has no awareness of how deeply stained they really are and how infinitely holy God is. We must be undone before we can be remade. The Holy Spirit has to awaken us to our sinfulness before we can be summoned to His grace.

Isaiah's conviction is clear and it is deep. Isaiah comes face to face with the excuse-silencing, sin-exposing, overwhelming holiness of God. He sees himself as he is and he sees the reality of himself despite the fact that he is a prophet, despite the fact that he speaks for God. He sees the great gulf between the One of whom he speaks and himself. He feels the weight of the fact that his lips themselves are impure because out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, right? And he sees his heart clearly for the first time. Now think about that. He was a prophet. He was one of the greatest prophets the world has ever seen, but in reality he was just like those to whom he preached. In the presence of the majesty and the glory and the purity, the holiness of this God, he saw his impurity. All of Isaiah's righteousness was as filthy rags before the Lord. He saw his depravity and he is completely undone. "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!"

Isaiah has beheld the holy God and he expects it to be his death. He does not see any way that he gets out of here alive. How can he? This is not just religious talk. He believes that the holiness and purity of God will consume him. Everything we see here makes us to believe that Isaiah saw his situation as hopeless. And it in the midst of that hopelessness that the Holy God acts in holy grace.

The Holy God is the God of Holy Grace (v. 6-7) God is gracious. His grace is a holy grace. God is not content to leave his servant in the dust, but He sends forth His angel to cleanse Him, to purify not just his lips but his very soul. God takes the initiative with Isaiah and sends one of the seraphs with a coal from the altar and he touches Isaiah's lips and purifies him. Look at it. "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.'" (Isaiah 6:6-7, ESV) In fact notice the language. "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." The seraph takes a burning coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs – why tongs –

not because it was hot, he is a flaming angel, right. It's because the coal is holy, belonging to the place of sacrifice, of atonement, of forgiveness.

Isaiah's guilt is taken away but it is not shrugged off. God's grace is a holy grace. The Holy God does not ignore sin. Instead he tells Isaiah that his sin "is atoned for." In other words, it was paid for. How? By a coal from the altar of sacrifice which points to the atonement of Christ for his sins. His sin was paid for in Jesus. How? Isaiah lived many hundreds of years before Jesus. God forgave Isaiah on the basis of what Christ was going to do hundreds of years later. It all has to do with how God views Christ. Remember that Jesus is the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world...

Just like He is willing to forgive you and I on the basis of what He has done many hundreds of years before us. This burning coal symbolizes the finished work of Christ on the cross.

When Jesus (the sinless Son of God) died on the cross, He paid for our sin. God's holy justice burned with holy wrath upon the head of our substitute (sin is punished) so that God can extend mercy (on the basis of Christ's substitution). The reason we are called children of God is not because we are good . . . but because we are forgiven. We are forgiven not because we were among the best of the class but because Christ died for our sin. God took the initiative to span the gulf between Him and us. That is the only way that we can even stand to be in the presence of our glorious God and not be consumed with His holiness. That is the only reason we can be bold enough to offer to Him worship, to give Him anything that remotely approaches His worth.

This cleansing that Isaiah experiences is completely a work of God. He commands and accomplishes it all. Isaiah contributed nothing. Isaiah is brought face to face with his sin, his helplessness, his hopelessness and God forgives his sin, his sin is atoned for by an act of holy grace. And it is costly, as Al Mohler says, "The coal, after all, came from the altar, not from a campfire." It came from the place of sacrifice. And it ought to be for us an amazing thought – that this Holy God, high and exalted, delights to dwell with us, to give himself to us in worship, to remove all barriers to our coming to Him and experiencing the fullness of joy in His presence, to satisfy our souls with Himself. He makes it happen. And notice what was the result of Isaiah's vision of God...

Revelation Demands a Response (v.8) We see it in verse 8: "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me.'" (Isaiah 6:8, ESV) Isaiah had seen God, had seen his own sinfulness, had experienced the holy grace of God, and then, in response to the question of who would go for God, Isaiah takes up the mantle of responsibility to make His holiness and grace known. Having been convinced that he was about to be disintegrated by the very holiness of God and having received an unmerited, unexpected, saving work of God's grace, what else could he do?

Revelation demands a response. It demands that we be moved, that we respond in submission and obedience to the God who has revealed himself, his holiness, and his grace. Revelation demands an ongoing response – worship, holy and consecrated lives, proclamation of the gospel. God's holiness must rest with weight upon us, beloved. The frankness of this passage tells us that we are dealing with someone terribly awesome. The One who calls us into His presence, who calls us to Himself, who invites us into tender intimacy is, after all, greater than the whole universe, more massively powerful than anything we have ever known, three times holy. We see how awesomely supreme and holy the supreme and holy God is. We cannot take Him lightly.

Now some folks look at passages like this and say, "But that's the OT, Jesus isn't like that. God was angry then. Jesus is softer and gentler." Let me show you something. Turning to John 12:37-41 we read: Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him." (John 12:37-41, ESV) John is quoting Isaiah's words immediately after the passage we're looking at in Isaiah 6. Remember, we have Isaiah groveling on the ground, stunned into cursing himself. And who is it that He sees high and lifted up, three times holy? Whose train fills the temple? It is the pre-incarnate Christ. It is the Son of God before He had taken on flesh. That is whom Isaiah sees -- Jesus, the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature before He was incarnate. This Holy God is the One who took on human flesh and saved us from the penalty of our sins. This is the God who deserves all worship and praise. Oh how I pray that God would grant us a vision of His holiness; that God would reveal the depths of His holiness to us; that we

would feel it in our souls. We need this vision of God more than we need anything else. To the degree that this vision of God is not present in our churches – adoration, worship, reverence and awe, obedience and service to God vanishes.

Without a view of God’s holiness, sin is merely self-defeating behavior or a breach in social etiquette. Minus a view of the holiness of God, grace loses its meaning. What need for grace is there if God is not holy? Without a view of the holiness of God, the gospel becomes indistinguishable from any of a host of other religions. Minus the holiness of God, the cross has no meaning, Christ’s sacrifice loses its power, and God’s love loses its glory. Minus the holiness of God, our morality is reduced to minimum standards of conduct required by other people. Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes mere entertainment.

Everything about God should fill us with awe. Does he? Again, David Wells says: Holiness is what defines God’s character most fundamentally, and a vision of this holiness should inspire his people and evoke their worship, sustain their character, fuel their passion for truth, and encourage persistence in efforts to do his will and call on his name in petitionary prayer...Robbed of such a God, worship loses its awe, the truth of his Word loses its ability to compel, obedience loses its virtue, and the church loses its moral authority. The danger for us is clear -- the longer we know God, the greater the danger of taking Him for granted. If God is holy, the first question we must ask ourselves, the great question before us today is this: “How should we regard, how should we approach the God who is?” We cannot enter into his presence flippantly, complacently, with casualness or unthinking familiarity, without awe, fear and reverence, without a profound awareness of the grace – the crushing of Jesus Christ on our behalf – that grants us entrance. We need to see and feel the holiness of God...

Transition to Lord’s Supper

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