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God Is: Holy

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TEXT: Isaiah 6:1-8 (ESV)

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. 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. 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!”

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.”

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.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

“‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’

Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:

“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

Dear friends,

A little girl was on the living room floor drawing pictures, and her father asked her, “What are you drawing?” “A picture of God,” she answered. The father responded, “Honey, don't you know that no one knows what God looks like?” She replied, “Well, they will when I'm through!”

Our passage for the day draws an incredible picture of God for us that we really need to see and understand. It comes from a period of Israel's history when God's people had lost sight of what God had meant them to be. And they had also lost their vision of how awesome and great and sovereign God is. They still showed up for worship each Sabbath with their hymns and sacrifices, but they were living a compartmentalized existence, worshipping on the Sabbath, but ignoring and disobeying God the rest of the week. Their ungodly conduct is described for us in the first five chapters of Isaiah. Righteous living had been thrown out the window by these people. They no longer loved God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind, and they surely did not love their neighbor as themselves. There were some awful things going on in that society. And of course, God was incensed by this. This is not what he called his people to be like. How in the world could they possibly be a light to the nations like this?

So, God responded to this disobedience by giving a man named Isaiah an overwhelming vision of himself – a picture. He also called Isaiah to go after his rebellious people to be God's spokesman and call them to repent or else. Isaiah was a statesman of his day, respected among us people, consulted by kings and princes, he was known for his integrity in the community. Well, one Sabbath, he had gone to the temple to worship. Judah's King was dead, we're told, but Isaiah saw another king in the temple that day, the ultimate king, and now Isaiah's life would never be the same again. Listen to his testimony: “I saw the Lord.” He saw God. Notice that the way Lord looks in your Bible. It begins with a capital letters followed by lowercase letters, which

means this is a title, Adonai, meaning the sovereign one. He saw the Lord, the sovereign king of the universe. He saw him in this overwhelming, blinding brilliance and glory and majesty. He was seated on the throne high and lifted up, a power and authority image there. He couldn't see his face because no one can. Remember, Moses wanted to see God's face and God said no because he would die. He'd have to be satisfied seeing only his backside. And even then, Moses' face shown like the sun, we're told. And God's train of his government filled the whole temple – there we have a sense of the whole bigness of God that appeared in the greatness and dignity of God filling that whole big temple.

Isaiah saw seraphim, angel-type characters, standing above God. They had six wings, two to cover their eyes. Why do they cover their eyes? Because they couldn't look into God's face either, because they were only creatures in God's sight, unable to stand looking at his brilliant face. Two of their wings covered their feet. Why were their feet being covered? Because they were standing on holy ground in God's presence. And the other two wings were to fly with. And then Isaiah heard these seraphim loudly calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. Heaven and Earth are filled with his glory." Do you notice a triple use of the word holy? It's for emphasis. The only place you will find a triple emphasis like this on God's attributes is in this passage and in the Book of Revelation. This is a super-emphasis. Nowhere else in scripture will you find God described as "love, love, love" or "wise, wise, wise." No, God is holy, holy, holy.

So, we need to ask, what does that word mean? In fact, it's vital for us to understand this term because it's foundational to our faith. We sometimes think of words like purity and perfection when we think of holiness and those hold some truth and get into this word. But it doesn't completely capture the word's meaning. Holy really means more than this. It means separate, other, transcendent; that's our God. He is separate – a cut above the rest, so to speak. He is other. There's no one and nothing like him. He is transcendent above all, beyond all limitations, beyond all comparison. The seraphim call him the "Lord of hosts" as well, which means that God is the powerful being over all things and the whole Earth is full of His glory. That's how big he is. Glory is God's presence.

Suddenly, Isaiah felt the whole place shake its foundations because of the voices of the seraphim. And then he saw and smelled smoke – the smoke of the altar, where the sacrifices were being made in the temple. And there was darkness in all the smoke. But

there was something else shaking more than that temple was shaking. Isaiah now was shaking in terror. Why do you suppose? Because Isaiah saw something else in the midst of this experience of seeing God's holiness. He saw his own sinfulness before his holy God, and it terrified him. The brilliance of God exposed Isaiah for his filth, and he comes totally undone before God. "Woe is me, I'm lost." He comes apart at the seams. "I'm a goner. I'm a man of unclean lips." Remember now what Jesus said about the lips, the mouth: they reveal the heart which is filthy and polluted before God. Jesus said, "It's not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out," and out of the heart comes some terrible, terrible things. He says. In my eyes, I've seen the King, the Lord of hosts. I'm a man of unclean lips, living among people of unclean lips, and I'm a sinner. My life is probably over now because I've looked at God. He's in a serious state of being – a real predicament. The unholy standing before the holy. As John Stott, in his book, *The Cross of Christ*, points out: "That God is holy and foundational is biblical religion, so is the corollary that sin is incompatible with his holiness. His eyes are too pure to look on evil and he cannot tolerate wrong."

But an amazing thing happens in our story. As Isaiah stood there, exposed, guilty before a holy God shaking like a leaf, expecting the worst, he got the best: God's grace was given to him. One of the seraphim took a burning coal off that sacrificial altar with tongs and flew over and touched his lips with it and announced, "Behold, this has touched your lips, Isaiah. Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." What just happened there? Isaiah received forgiveness. And as a forgiven man, gratefully stood there marveling at God's grace, he next heard God's voice calling out, "Whom shall I send, who will go for us?" And Isaiah couldn't help himself. And he said, "Here am I, Lord, send me." And now Isaiah was a man with a holy calling for the rest of his life, a man of unclean lips, now clean before God. A spokesman for God, bringing God's message to God's lost and sinful nation. It is quite a story, isn't it?

So what do we learn from it? We learn that God's holy. Everything about God is holy; separate, transcendent, pure. His judgment is holy, his love is holy, his mercy is holy, his wisdom is holy; holy, holy, holy is our God. We need to keep that word at the forefront of all of our thinking about God as we go through life, as we strive to live faithfully as his people. I appreciate what pastor and author Colin Smith wrote: "A proper vision of the holiness of God is essential for us. Without it, our worship descends into entertainment, our sins become mistakes, and our lives will drift on with

little evidence of significant growth."

I would be remiss if I didn't also make this next point: the holiness of God revealed to Isaiah in our story points us to another day when the holiness of God would be revealed. We see it at the cross: Jesus, a holy one of God, whom Isaiah actually saw that day according to John 12, was placed upon the altar of the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. And the earth shook, and darkness covered the earth. And Jesus took our holy God's judgment upon himself for our sins. That's how serious sin is. In his death, Jesus made the sacrifice so that people who are coming apart by God's holiness, seeing themselves for who they really are, may be touched and healed by the grace and forgiveness of God. So just as the angel brought live coal from the altar of atonement in our story, God stands ready to touch our lives with the effects of the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ. From the altar of Calvary, God comes to us in grace and he says, "Your guilt is taken away. Your sin is atoned for." Hallelujah, hallelujah! God is holy.

So, what does that mean for how I live my life? A couple of things come to mind, ideas. First idea comes from Peter the apostle, who wrote in his letter to Christians, "Don't 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.'" Did you hear that? We are to be holy – not "holier than thou," as our minds sometimes go, but holy, letting go of the old and sinful passions, because now we have one holy passion: following Jesus Christ. We're called to conduct ourselves as holy people of God, displaying holy love, holy living, obeying God's ways, following the example of the holy one Jesus, who gave his life as a ransom to free us from our sins. And there's great impact in that. You see, holiness is not dull. It's not killjoy. It makes life better, and it makes us more attractive to those who need Jesus Christ, as they see our life working, as they see our lives filled with peace and joy of walking obediently with our God. And how does this sort of thing happen in us? Well, on our own, it's impossible. But we have the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us and shapes and molds us into the image of Christ. As we dwell on the word of God and call upon him in prayer for help, it's a lifelong process that goes on in us until that great day when we're promised that we will see God face to face. "Be holy as I am holy," God says.

The other thing is: be reverent. Exercise reverence as you approach your holy God, who has saved you through Jesus Christ. This passage calls us to recover a sense of God's

holiness and bigness. And so, for instance, as we approach him in our worship, we need to ask ourselves, are we doing so in a spirit of deep reverence or with a casual attitude? Remember, when you enter the church sanctuary, you are in sacred space, holy ground before a holy God who deserves nothing but the best you can give him in your worship. The question after worship isn't to be "Did I enjoy myself?", but instead it's to be "Did God enjoy that? Did I give God my best in worship today?" It's interesting that in the presence of a celebrity, we stumble around looking for words, we bend over backwards to express our appreciation for him or her, we look adoringly in awe upon them. Well, then why not God, the king of the universe, who saved you through his son, Jesus Christ?

Beyond worship, we need to ask about our daily life: have I gotten a bit casual with my almighty, holy God? Uttered his name thoughtlessly or dishonored or misrepresented his holy name before others with my unholy conduct? Have I done things my way and ignored his way? We all do that. At least I know I do. And when I have, then it's time to stop and confess to him: "Woe is me. I am an unclean son needing your cleansing grace. Have mercy on me, Lord, and restore and renew me by your spirit that I might walk obediently in your ways." We have a holy God. He calls us to be holy. And to approach his throne of grace. With reverence. Let's pray:

Gracious and holy God, in the light of your holiness, I feel deeply aware of my own sin. I know that apart from your grace, I'd be ruined. So, thank you for the grace that comes through Christ to all who believe in him. I know sin resides within my heart. Touch me with your cleansing power and let what is touch to be changed forever. And then let me live as your holy servant set apart for you that I may bring honor and glory to your holy name. Amen.