

God Reveals Himself to Isaiah

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is holy and glorious beyond compare.

Holiness is a difficult concept for many Christians to grasp, and holy living is difficult to put into practice. But there is no backing away from this character trait—holiness is essential to the Christian life. We are to be holy, just as our God is holy.

 What comes to mind when you think of the word *holy*?

 Why do you think God is so serious about His holiness?

In this session, the prophet Isaiah has a vision of God high and lifted up—holy and glorious in His temple. In light of God’s piercing holiness, Isaiah received a proper vision of his own sin and unworthiness. But God, in His grace, restored Isaiah to service and gave the prophet a message for the people. Like Isaiah, we too are undone by the vision of God’s glory, but through His grace, God deals with our sin and then commissions us to deliver His message of love to the world.

Voices from the Church

“Our God is a consuming fire. He is satisfied only when His love totally consumes us... We should not resent the fact that God wants to guard our relationship with Him. It should bring us comfort.”¹

—Henry T. Blackaby and Richard Blackaby

Date of My Bible Study: _____

1. We see the living God as holy and glorious (Isa. 6:1-4).

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. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

List the different words and phrases Isaiah used to describe his vision of the Lord.	What do these words and phrases communicate? What kind of atmosphere is created by them?

In the presence of God, the seraphim (“fiery” winged creatures) surrounding Him covered themselves in humility and also cried out the truth of God’s character: “Holy, holy, holy!” Repeating the word “holy” three times is intended to express the great difference between God and His creation. “God’s holiness reveals how very separate, different, totally other he is in comparison to all other aspects of the created world.”² Furthering the awe-inspiring scene in Isaiah’s vision, the voices of the seraphim call to one another, rocking the very foundation of the building.



Voices from Church History

“Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide Thee, Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see; Only Thou art holy; There is none beside Thee, Perfect in power, in love, and purity.”³

—Reginald Heber
(1783-1826)

I have never experienced an earthquake, but I do remember what it was like when Mount St. Helens erupted. The blast was described as 1,600 times the size of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.⁴ In the temple, these angelic creatures were proclaiming the holiness of God—the One who made volcanoes such as Mount St. Helens. Just the proclamation of God’s holiness was enough to shake the foundations! God’s revelation of Himself to Isaiah was awesome and terrifying.



What does this vision of the Lord convey about the nature of God?



What have you witnessed that reflects the power, majesty, beauty, and transcendence of God?

Some commentators suggest that just reading about God’s revelation of His holiness and power is enough to strike awe and wonder into our hearts. I wonder, though, if we are sheltered from being impacted so profoundly by Isaiah’s vision because of the society we live in, a culture that does not recognize God’s ultimate greatness and power.

We live in a culture that overlooks the glory of God displayed in the heavens because of light pollution. We mute the glory of God’s presence because of human-generated noise and busyness. We shortchange true intimacy with God through the perversion of intimate relationships and the sexual objectification of others. We drown out the awe that comes from even the gift of life itself through the destruction of the unborn and daily exposure to violent acts in film, television, and gaming. No wonder people walk away from God; their spiritual sensitivities have been dulled.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

15. *God Is Holy*

God’s holiness refers to His uniqueness in being separate from all He has created. The Hebrew word for “holy” means “separate” or “set apart.” God’s holiness also refers to His absolute purity. God is unstained by the evil of the world. His goodness is perfect, and the moral code we find in the Scriptures is a reflection of His holy nature. As people made in God’s image, we are called to holiness.

The culture (and for that matter, the church!) needs a vision of the terrifying goodness of God. We need reverence and amazement. When Isaiah received this vision, his realization of God's glorious nature led to ruin and redemption.



Why do you suppose that we as a society lack awe and wonder?

2. We see ourselves as sinful and unworthy (Isa. 6:5).

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 was filled with reverent terror. In recognizing the purity and goodness of God, he came to see his own lack of goodness—his uncleanness and sin. Even more importantly, he recognized that he was ruined in light of God's holiness. Destruction is the proper consequence for sin (Rom. 6:23). Here we see Isaiah's personal realization of that consequence. It was a devastating realization, leading to a confessional cry to God.

Unless we have a proper vision of our sin, we will fail to understand the essential need for God's forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ. We will have no moment of crying out to God, recognizing that we are unclean in the presence of goodness and light.

Isaiah realized he was going to die because of what he was, because of his character. He did not think he would die because he forgot to keep the laundry list of rules. No, he recognized that his character was so far away from the goodness of the character of God, of the Life-Giver, that he and his people were ruined. He cried out from the terror of his realization that he would indeed die.



What is the difference between keeping a list of moral rules and being conformed to the character of Christ?



What is the difference between asking for forgiveness of certain things we have done wrong and recognizing our utter ruin before the goodness of God?

“Woe is me! For I am lost.” When Jesus taught us to take up our cross and daily die to self (Luke 9:23), He gave us a vision of the personal ruin that leads us to redemption. There is only one way forward in the Christian life, and it is through an everyday struggle to die to our unclean wants, desires, and the influences of unclean society that have crept into the deepest places of our hearts. It is a struggle because much of the time we do not even stop to discover the death that reigns within us.

Voices from the Church

“Scripture is clear that our biggest problem is not that we *feel* guilty; it’s that we *are* guilty. It’s not that we have a low view of ourselves; it’s that we have too low a view of *God*.”⁵

—Trevin Wax

Isaiah’s vision gives us the prologue to the gospel—we must realize what we are as sinful human beings in contrast to the glorious nature of God. Only then can we receive the redemption of God that allows us to have relationship with this powerful Giver of life.



If a person has difficulty accepting the doctrine of sin, how would that difficulty affect the person’s reading of Isaiah’s vision?

3. We receive God's grace and a mission (Isa. 6:6-8).

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

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."

In the next scene of Isaiah's vision, an angel of the Lord took a burning coal from the altar. The imagery of the altar is important. On earth, the priests performed the sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, but here, the heavenly messengers performed the imagery-laden ritual of the removal of sin.

It is interesting to note that Isaiah never pleaded with God, nor did he beg God to show him mercy.⁶ He did not attempt to strike a bargain with the Lord. Rather, the atonement was an act of God's sheer grace in response to Isaiah's confession of his sinfulness. There was nothing magical about coal that could deal with the sinful condition of Isaiah's heart. It was a sign of God's mercy and forgiveness, of God's good gift of redemption.

The imagery of the altar and the burning coals of the sacrifice would have been familiar to Isaiah. The perfectly good justice of God that would bring His wrath on Isaiah's sin had been satisfied. Isaiah would not immediately suffer the consequence of his sin—death.



Why is it important to note that our confession of sin is not a bargaining tool with God?



What purpose does the confession of sin serve in relationship to our salvation in God?

Isaiah's experience with the living God shows us that to identify sin, we must have a vision or awareness of the holiness of God. We should then respond to God's holiness with confession as we recognize our sin.⁷ Again, notice it is not a laundry list of things I've done wrong. It is recognition of who we are as sinful humans in the light of the goodness of God's holiness. It is recognizing our hopelessness to simply "pull ourselves up." People who believe themselves to be "good" or "good enough" cannot experience the forgiveness of God because they will not recognize the holiness of God.

As human beings, we are all aware of the problem of human evil. Even if we are ignorant of human history, we all experience varying levels of evil on a daily basis (pain, suffering, injustice, unfairness). It wouldn't take long to see that it is humans that have created the problem and thus humans are not the answer. Indeed, when asked why God doesn't rid the world of all the evil right now, I must point out that if God did, there would be no humans left. Yet the Lord did not reveal Himself to us to bring about such destruction, as we can see from verses 6-8.

The Lord did not intend to destroy Isaiah; rather, He intended to redeem Isaiah, to establish relationship with him, and to use him greatly to serve others. In these last verses, the Lord revealed something more of His intention with Isaiah.

He had given Isaiah a vision of His holiness and glory, from which Isaiah experienced self-despair. Isaiah's despair produced a confession that brought him the forgiveness of God's grace and mercy. The forgiveness of God provided an opportunity for service. These experiences came together in a final offering of Isaiah's life in service to God.

We must first encounter the Lord in powerful ways in our own lives before we can powerfully testify to the Lord. Now, that doesn't mean that unless we have *Isaiah's type* of experience, we cannot testify. But we should take our faith—and investment into our faith—more seriously than we frequently do. When I train on how to have better conversations on belief in God, I am compelled to teach that unless you have a great vision of the Lord, your conversations will most likely feel contrived and/or forced.



Voices from Church History

"If you want to follow Jesus, you must follow him to the ends of the earth, for that is where he is going...We cannot think of God without thinking of him as a missionary God."⁸

—Robert Speer (1867-1947)



What is the relationship between Isaiah's experience of forgiveness and his willingness to volunteer to be God's messenger?

Conclusion

As a response to Isaiah's vision of God's holiness, we should stand in awe of the glory of God, manifested in all His attributes. Once we see ourselves for who we are in light of who God has shown Himself to be, we are undone in our sin and uncleanness. But thankfully, we serve a God who restores and commissions us through the sacrifice of His Son. The holiness and love of God meet at the cross, where Christ laid down His life for us.

Where does that leave us now? With the forgiveness we have in Christ, we lift our hands and say, "Here am I, Lord! Send me." We seek to spread the awe and wonder of God's glory and grace to those around us. We do so, fully acknowledging the risk that people will reject the beauty, power, and goodness of the Lord in favor of a ruined vision of their own making. But we believe that the Author of life will shine His light through us and bring about the salvation of others—people captivated by the beauty and power of the absolute goodness, namely, God, who transcends this present world.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Isaiah had a vision of a throne room with a divine King. Jesus later claimed that Isaiah had seen His glory and thus the prophet's words were about Him (John 12:32,41). Like Isaiah, when we see ourselves in light of God's holiness, we recognize our sinful state and need for salvation.



HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to live in light of our salvation by willingly delivering His message to the world, no matter how unpopular it may be.

1. What are some ways we as believers, both individually and corporately, can enhance our vision of God's glory and holiness?

2. How might sharing the gospel with non-Christians in our culture offend them, and how would you respond with truth and grace?

3. How does your own experience of God's majesty and love through salvation in Jesus lead you to respond in mission?
