

An Unfinished Pursuit to Understand Holiness

a sermon in the series
The Holiness of God

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Isaiah 6:1-5

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" 4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because 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."

To understand holiness is a project that can and will never be finished. To know holiness you need to know God, because God is holy and holiness is God. But the only person who will be completely able to know God is God. To know infinity, you need infinity, and that is something we don't possess. He is beyond our full and complete understanding.

However, a pursuit of the holy must begin even though we know it will not be finished. That is the purpose of this series. Frankly, He's worth knowing even if what we know is small. So I propose to you that from this moment forthwith, we dedicate the remainder of our lives to this project. This is what I think God gave you a mind for. You have the analytical abilities to reason because there is nothing greater for the mind to comprehend and be fascinated with than with the glory of God; namely, His holiness.

The history of this word *holy* is under some question or even argument. When you solely look at the word *holy* and its etymology (that is, the history of the word), we get some help, but not much, in understanding what holiness is, particularly God's holiness. Some scholars believe the word *holy* comes from a root word that means *to cut*. For example, in R.C. Sproul's classic book, *The Holiness of God*, Sproul writes this:

The primary meaning of holy is "separate." It comes from an ancient word that means "to cut," or "to separate." To translate this basic meaning into contemporary language would be to use the phrase "a cut apart." Perhaps even more accurate would be the phrase "a cut above something." When we find a garment or another piece of merchandise that is outstanding, that has a superior excellence, we use the expression that it is "a cut above the rest."

But I think Sproul's view is questionable for the simple fact that there is a lack of data showing that the word *holy* actually came from the word *cut*. Rarely, if ever, has there been a document found in Old Testament history that uses the word *holy* in this fashion. We do know that the word can be defined "to set apart" or "to keep oneself apart." Whether it goes any further than Sproul insinuates, I think you can't really say dogmatically. So etymology doesn't help us.

Mostly, the word in your Bible for "holy" is used to speak of something or someone set apart, usually consecrated for sacred purposes. For example, the utensils that were used in the tabernacle had been set apart. They looked like any other utensils, a spoon or a censer, but the particular utensil in the tabernacle had been sanctified or set apart by Moses' using blood and the sanctifying oil. Now it was dedicated to the use of worship only.

The Levites were set apart for the worship of God. Even the seventh day of the week was made holy; that is, set apart from the remainder of the week as the Sabbath. Now the question is, if the definition of the word *holy* is "set apart," then how do we understand God's holiness in light of that? How can you tell the difference between God's holiness and maybe the golden candlestick that was in the tabernacle? It, too, was holy. It, too, was set apart. How can you differentiate God being set apart from any other item or person that is also set apart? We know from common sense that God's holiness is different from the holiness of the high priest. But how? That is what we will explore here.

Let's return to Isaiah's terrifying and life-changing brush with holiness personified. I think we can better understand God's holiness by examining two things: the seraphim's reaction and response to God's holiness, and then Isaiah the prophet's response to it.

The Holy Cry

Let me first direct your attention to the angelic response to the holiness of God, namely verses 2 and 3. Above this vision of God on His throne were seraphim; each one with six wings. With two wings the seraph covered his face, with two wings he covered his feet, and with two wings he flew. They cried to one another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory."

Isaiah is precise in his wording. The seraphim were not saying these things to God on His throne, but to one another. This is their unending song; they never tire of repeating this refrain. These are not mentally deficient creatures! Most often it is the mentally retarded person who will sit with a gaze, staring and repeating syllables or words over and over without changing tone or tempo. But these creatures are intelligent. Their intelligence exceeds mankind's greatest geniuses. This is not because of a lack of intelligence that they keep repeating the same words; they can't do anything but marvel at the presence of God. They can find no other superlative. Their great intelligence is so captivated that all they can think or say is the same thing: "holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, and the earth is full of His glory."

Stop and think, what kind of glory is this that would captivate such intelligence like this?

Fearful to Look Upon

Second, notice the seraphim have not two wings like some angels we see in the Bible, but six. Can you imagine how fast they could fly with six wings? But all six wings were not used for flying; they were designed for something else. Isaiah said that with two wings they cover their faces. Here in the very presence of a beauty far more beautiful than theirs, and they won't dare to look on it. You don't drive all the way to the Grand Canyon and once you get there, put a blindfold on so you can't see it. You don't go to the Smoky Mountains and once you're there cup your hands over your eyes so you can't see their beauty. Yet here these angels are in the beautiful presence of God, and they cover their faces with two of their wings so they can't see Him.

Now, this is interesting for many reasons. For one, other angels are allowed to look upon God. They come into His presence, they leave His presence, and they seem to be able to look upon His majesty the King. Why not these angels? It seems to me that they were created to dwell in the very presence of God. You might call them guarding courtiers at the very throne of God. We see them once again in the Bible: in the book of Revelation. There, they are described even more: they have four faces. These awesome beings were created to stay in the very presence of God and sing His constant praise. In fact, the word *seraphim* actually means "burning ones" or "shining ones." These are profoundly holy angels.

They were designed for nothing more than this: to communicate how holy God is. That is their sole purpose. One of the ways the angels convey that message is by taking two of their wings and covering their faces. 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 would feel as a sinner if we looked upon Him. 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) won't even dare to look into the shining face of God. Now we know that the Bible says no man can look upon the face of God and live; that's what the Lord told Moses when Moses asked to see God's glory. But these are not sinners; these are not men, these are angels. Other angels can look upon God, why not these? I think the answer is because these dwell in the very presence of God's holiness and glory. They abide in the most intense and infinite level of holiness there is; which is more than even they can endure.

Embarrassed in the Presence of God

Third, notice also that these angels take another two wings and cover their feet. This, too, speaks much. God knows what their feet look like; He made them! Why cover them? Isaiah understood what that meant even if we don't. He had spent much time in royal courts. When you entered the presence of a king you were to take your outer long, flowing coat or robe and cover your lower legs as you bowed before the king. The gesture acknowledged that the king was more important than you; it was an act of humility. 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. Despite of their goodness and their beauty, they knew they didn't deserve to be there. That must mean there is a conviction resulting from the holy presence of God so that even sinless creatures feel unworthy.

Holiness is hard to define, even for the seraphim. All they can do is cry: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." And even though they are holy, they know enough to feel unworthy to be in His presence. How holy must He be?

The question, this morning, is how do we treat this Holy God? Here are angels that are in the presence of God day and night who feel unworthy to be there, covering their eyes covering their feet. Why is it that we can sometimes enter into the presence of God and begin to utter His name and pray so flippantly, so lazily, with such complacency? What is the problem? Namely, we really don't understand holiness: we really don't know God.

Isaiah's Response to the Holiness of God

Let me direct your attention to Isaiah's response to the holiness of God. I want you to see that Isaiah experiences a physical sensation throughout his body that he feels as though his body is coming apart. Upon seeing this holy God, Isaiah's body trembled. His tremors are more than knees knocking and shaky hands and quivering lips. He feels his entire body begin to break apart from the stress of this infinite holiness. The molecules inside Isaiah began to accelerate to a pace they cannot sustain. He feels his mind overwhelmed by the energy of pure purity, pure holiness, and he feels as though his brain is going to melt. He feels the pressure build up on the inside of him like a character in a Steven Spielberg movie; he feels that at any moment his body will explode into a million pieces. "Woe is me, for I am undone!" is all he can say.

The word woe means a pronouncement of judgment: it's a curse. It appears throughout Isaiah's book, as well as Jeremiah, even Jesus used it as a curse. The prophet Isaiah uses it to bring upon himself judgment: "Woe is me" – he curses himself! This is amazing. What would you pronounce upon yourself if you could see God right now?

We know that Isaiah was feeling this physically because he continues, "I am undone." Here's where I'm sure of it: that his body began to break under the load of pure infinite glory. The word "undone" means to perish, or to destroy. In other words, Isaiah is crying that he is perishing or being destroyed, or coming unraveled at the seams – all by just sighting God in His holiness.

Recognition of Sinfulness

Second, Isaiah not only feels physically as if his body is beginning to break down. But he also feels his sinfulness: he says, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Here, the recognition is clear and it's very deep. He felt his unworthiness in the presence of God, and as far as Isaiah thought, this was the end – he

was not getting out of there alive. *This is it; this is where I'm going to die; this is how I'm going to die: the purity and holiness of God are going to kill me.*

Have you ever felt that? Most of you have probably never felt the pressure of genuine holiness, of God in holiness coming into your presence. I have experienced it twice in my life: once at my conversion, and the second was here at the church. I'll never forget it – my wife Karen and I were praying with a Christian brother about a need in our church. Suddenly, God came into this place. I was praying about someone else's sin, but God came not to deal with that person but to deal with my sin. It was like something extremely heavy was placed on my chest – I couldn't breathe; I couldn't grasp air. I began to feel my body slipping away because of the holiness of God – it was as though He had put His finger on my heart. I felt as if my chest was going to be crushed and I cried out to God for mercy.

Have you ever experienced the holiness of God so tangibly that you not only felt it, but also experienced unworthiness? At that moment, all of Isaiah's righteousness was like filthy rags. He couldn't stand to be there! We, as Christians, have a right to be in the presence of God, but when His presence becomes so real you begin to understand holiness, and it's not the definition we work with most of the time. You immediately become overwhelmed as a result of your own wretchedness. There are no excuses. Your best day looks like something that could condemn you to hell forever.

My question is: why isn't the world overwhelmed with God? Why do people not feel overwhelmed and unworthy and wicked in the presence of God? And the only answer is, they never see God. He isn't in their minds and therefore not in their hearts, and they don't get it. Paul said 2,000 years ago, "The fear of God is not before their eyes." Some of you today still don't get it. God is not to be trifled with! You don't mess with God!

I'm going to say something you won't like, but it's in the Bible: God is terrible. And his terror is terrible. Where do you think the word terror comes from? Look at our world and our nation! Look how we are living! There's no fear of God – we act as if God is a doting grandfather in the sky. But as much as I want the world see a holy God, I'm more concerned about you. How do you see the Lord? How do you think of Him? With the constant dripping of a carnal Christianity emitting a kind of God that is more friend than holy deity, I wonder do you still see the King of glory, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up? In most churches God is more akin to the image of Santa Clause than to Isaiah's image of God. I wonder are you careful of how you approach Him?

With churches where God is not honored as a holy, terrible God, and where I would be laughed to scorn for saying something like that, where God is seen more as a friend than a divine, holy Person – I must ask: How do you approach God? Even though He is your Father, how do you, brothers and sisters, maintain a righteous, holy view of God so that there remains holy fear in your heart?

I know the answer is Jesus – because of Jesus we can go to the Father and we don't have to

be afraid. I know there is a verse that says, "Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace," but friends, one of the constant themes of this series is this: don't make the mistake so many others have made in thinking that since Jesus has died on the cross that it doesn't matter how we treat God because Jesus' blood covers it all. No! that isn't Biblical! If you've really experienced the love of the Lord Jesus Christ and His forgiveness by grace, than dear friend, something has changed in your heart towards God. He's now somebody to fear and yet be drawn to at the same time. But if you're not careful, and it will happen to you, the Christian culture we find ourselves in (which is not very biblical) will suck us into this image of God that is basically a friend only, not a righteous, holy Deity. We need to see both His friendship and His terrifying holiness.

A Definition in Progress

Let's put together the responses of angels and prophet and fashion the beginning of a definition of God's holiness.

First, I think we can say God is holy unlike anything else is holy. His holiness must mean exactly what the word means: to be set apart or separated. But in the case of God, He is so set apart that nothing is as holy as He, not even holy angels. God is in a class all of His own.

I love the way the Puritan Stephen Charnock said it in his book, *The Existence and the Attributes of God*.

Though God hath crowned the angels with an unspotted sanctity, and placed them in a habitation of glory, yet as illustrious as they are, they have unworthiness in their own nature to appear before the throne of so holy a God. Their holiness grows dim and pale in his presence; it is but a weak shadow of that divine purity, whose light is so glorious that it makes them cover their faces out of weakness to behold it, and cover their feet out of shame in themselves. Shame? What do these holy angels have to be ashamed about? They've never sinned; they're not going to sin, and yet Charnock says there's something of shame about them because of where they are. How do you explain that? They've done nothing wrong; what have they got to be ashamed about? He answers:

They are not pure in His sight, though they love God (which is a principle of holiness we'll cover in this series) as much as they can, yet not so much as He deserves. They love Him with the strongest degree according to their power, but not with the strongest degree according to His own loveliness; for they cannot infinitely love God unless they were as infinite as God, and had an understanding of His perfections equal with Himself, and as immense as His own knowledge.

In other words, Charnock is saying these seraphim were ashamed that they could not love God to the degree that His beauty and lovability deserve. These holy creatures who never sinned, feel a sense of shame in the presence of pure holiness. Although they love Him with all of their being, they can't quite love Him as much as He deserves, and it brings a sense of humiliation; yes, even shame.

Which leads me to my question: How embarrassed are you in the presence of God? Let me present something to you that seems contradictory to grace (it isn't; it will be the result of grace in you): you should never, ever lose a sense of embarrassment at the presence of God. When you do, sin is right around the corner. You'll be emboldened to sin because you'll have nothing to be afraid of.

It would seem to me, then, that holiness among us would have to be measured by this same standard which the angels have set for us. They're holy not just because they don't sin, but because they feel and realize an embarrassment in the presence of God. Their embarrassment is not because they sinned; they feel a sense of unworthiness because they can't love and worship Him as He deserves. My question to you is how embarrassed are you for loving the Lord less than He should be loved? You can't wiggle out of this and say, "Nobody can love God like that." Friends, these are very intelligent creatures; they already know that. They know that better than you do. And yet, with that same knowledge, they are not kept from so blushing that they cover their faces to hide their shame.

Are you embarrassed that you love God so little? If not, why not? Why do you and I often not feel embarrassment that we don't love Him like we should? How is it possible that you could leave here not much different than the way you came – how is that, after looking at this holy passage and seeing God in these words lifted up? The answer is simple: you so lack holiness that you can't see how far beneath God's lofty heights you have fallen. We just don't see how far from Him we are, even though we've been made one in Christ.

In addition to seeing that God is holy, that He alone is distinct from all of His creation, nobody can love God like God – that makes Him the most holy of all people. But Isaiah's reaction says that holy must not mean simply separate. God is holy unlike anyone else. But the word *holy* also means *moral purity*. The purity of God burns so infinitely intense that Isaiah felt as though he were the worst sinner who ever lived. You see, that's why I say to you over and over again – conviction of sin is a necessity before salvation. That's why we use the statement, "you must be lost before you may be saved." You have to understand your sinfulness in order to ever take advantage of grace. And I am praying that God in His mercy would show you, yet unconverted, a glimpse of His holiness. Not enough to kill you (if you saw more than you could physically handle, you would die immediately), but enough to let you see your wretchedness and vileness so clearly that you would stink to yourself. The stench of your sin would nauseate you so you would run to the cross and find His blood a sweet fragrance to cover and wash away the filth of sin.

God's holiness is demonstrated not only in Isaiah's wretchedness, but also in the angels' purity. The angels have not sinned, but they evidently have power to sin – otherwise, the angels that transgressed with Lucifer could never have done so. Angels can sin. I will quote Charnock again: "Holiness is a quality separable from these angels, but it is inseparable from God." That means the angels can cease to be holy – they can change, but God can't. He is as holy today as He has ever been, and He will always be holy. Charnock continues: "Had [the seraphim] not at first a mutability in their nature, none of them could have sinned, there had been no devils; but because

some of them sinned, the rest [could and] might have sinned.”

Those six-winged creatures know for certain what you and I take for granted. They always see what we often lose sight of: that they and we are in the presence of God not by merit, but by divine favor. Grace is why those angels are in the presence of God: grace not in the forgiveness of sin (as they have none to forgive), but grace in an undeserved kindness permitting them into the very presence of God. That is how holy God is: that even pure angels don't deserve to be in His presence. The seraphim know that their fate is different from the one-third of angels that followed Lucifer for one reason only: because God in His grace kept them from going the same way.

These angels will never change in their morality, yet they could. If they remain moral and pure, which they will, they will do so because God preserves them and keeps them from evil. They don't remain pure because they can't do but otherwise, or because it's their nature to do so – they remain pure because God is so loving that in grace He keeps them. It's only God who is unchangeable – He remains pure because he cannot be impure. He cannot change; He is immutable; He cannot be one ounce less pure and holy than He is and has always been. That is true holiness, and any other kind of holiness is derived from Him, given as a gift.

I close with this question: if you are a Christian, how is it that you or I have any degree of holiness? Why are you as pure as you think you are? Why haven't you gone down as far as some on the highways and byways of sin? There is only one answer, and it is the same answer as why those angels didn't fall with Lucifer and why they still remain pure. It's because of God's loving grace toward you. If you are saved you have a degree of holiness. God has given it to you and He preserves you in it. Don't think it's because you're good if you have any holiness about you. How can you look down upon the less holy and more sinful and somehow think yourself better? Your holiness is a gift, not earned or achieved. Holy God allows unholy creatures to come into His presence without condemnation, and yet we look down our noses at those who we think are less holy than we are. Friends, that cannot be! Come with me and be amazed that we are not now in hell. Join me instead to go to the Father of mercy. Let us go to Him trembling and yet rejoicing in His amazing grace.

It is amazing that we can be here today in the presence of God and not be incinerated. We have not gained this favor by our own efforts; it is solely His love for us. That should not make us tremble any less; instead it should cause us to tremble with great joy. Amen.