

The Holy God

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[0 : 01] Well, let me add my word of welcome. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor at St Silas Church, and it would be a great help to me if you could take hold of your Bibles again and turn with me to Isaiah chapter 6.

And let me lead us in a prayer to ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray together. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we ask that in your mercy you would speak to us now by your Spirit through your word.

And by that same Spirit, would you give us a vision of your holiness and move us to respond rightly to you, the Holy God, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Great, well, one of the ways that our lives have dramatically changed is social distancing. And we have to keep our distance from each other to stay safe. It's a painful thing, staying away from people we love.

But just imagine discovering that there is a person so good and generous, so glorious and so happy, that true contentment and delight come in being close to him.

[1 : 06] But that we have to keep our distance for our own safety. In fact, it's the very fact of their perfect goodness that puts us in danger and we have to hide away.

We're in this series on knowing God, to know the living God. This morning we're thinking about God's holiness. And we're looking at this encounter that Isaiah had with the living God.

We're told when God appeared to Isaiah. If you look at verse 1. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. What's really interesting about that for us today is the time that God showed up for Isaiah.

Israel was in a crisis. Under King Uzziah, Israel had enjoyed a time of prosperity and wealth. But they'd stopped listening to God. They'd become self-sufficient.

And up to the north, an empire was growing, a threat, the Assyrian Empire. And as the king died, a nation that had become wealthy and self-sufficient and proud was quickly starting to feel very vulnerable and threatened.

[2 : 15] That's when God showed up in his holiness. Well, here we are in Glasgow, in the Western world, in the coronavirus crisis. Couldn't some of that be said of us?

Haven't we become wealthy, self-sufficient and suddenly find ourselves vulnerable? For Israel, it was at that point they needed to see God in his holiness.

And we're going to see four things from Isaiah chapter 6 about God's holiness. It overwhelms you. It strikes you down. It heals you. And then it transforms you.

First, it overwhelms you. Have a look with me again at verse 1. 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.

And then we meet the warrior angels, the seraphim. The word means burning ones. These terrifying messengers of God are flaming with fire, but even they have to cover their faces with their wings because they can't look on the holiness of God.

[3 : 24] And the cry from the seraphim is, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. A repeating word is, in the Hebrew language, how you say something is more or greater.

So, Fir Hill is a stadium. Hamden Park is a stadium stadium. It's bigger. It's greater. A wedding ring is gold. 24-carat gold is gold gold.

But this is the only time in the Bible that something is described three times over. God is holy, holy, holy. And what we're getting there is that God's holiness is off the scale.

He is holy in a way that's beyond our ability to measure or think. That's what causes the earthquake. Verse 4. The noise. At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook,

and the temple was filled with smoke.

So, the overall scene from Isaiah is that when God shows up, it is terrifying because he is holy. So, God's holiness is his otherness.

[4 : 34] It's his godness that he is different to everything else. He's in a different league. He's set apart. And in the Bible, that carries with it two big ideas, his transcendence and his moral purity.

His transcendence is that God is the majestic, uncreated creator. Everything else apart from God was made by him. So, he stands apart from his creation.

Even those flaming warrior angels, there is no one else and nothing else like him. And his moral purity is his perfect goodness. That God never does anything wrong.

So, that when we, as sinful people, approach God, it's like a rock hurtling into the sun. It's not going to go well for the rock. If we came into God's presence, we would get burned up, not by gas like a star, but by blazing perfection.

So, it's right that we want to know God and to see God. We've heard, two weeks ago, we thought about his beauty and that satisfaction comes from seeing him and enjoying his presence. But then here we get a vision of God that should strike fear into us.

[5 : 46] It shows us that we're like Moses, who when he wanted to see God, had to hide away in a cave in the cleft of a rock for his own protection. And it's worth asking, are you ready to meet God like this?

God as he really is. Isaiah turned up to the temple that day. It was the equivalent at the time of doing what we're doing right now, turning up for virtual church this morning.

But the last thing Isaiah was expecting was for God to show up like this. And yet, in the crisis, it's what he needed most. It's what God's people needed most. Friends, I just wonder if, of all the different things we could say about the attributes of God in this series we're in, I wonder if his holiness is the one that we're most missing in our spiritual lives today.

Haven't we become casual about God? Apathetic about who he is and where we stand with him? And man-centered, exalting ourselves and diminishing God.

And when the holy God actually shows up, like he did for Isaiah, what we see is he's not like us, only a bit bigger. He's not the big man upstairs. He's not God Almighty.

[7 : 07] He's God Almighty. He is truly awesome. So that's our first point. God's holiness overwhelms you. Secondly, it strikes you down. Look with me at verse 5.

Woe to me, I cried. I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.

When we see God as he really is, all of our questioning, rebellious questioning, stops. Maybe we think about meeting God after we die, and we think something like, well, I'm going to have a few things I want to ask him about.

I've got a few things I want to say to God. I don't like the way he's been running things in my life. The reality is, that when we're face to face, with ultimately who God is, we're not going to be firing accusations at him.

We're going to be hiding in the cleft. Woe to me, I am ruined. Even if we'd never sinned, we'd be ruined, when we're so suddenly aware of our creatureliness, his sheer godness.

[8 : 12] Like the disciples in the boat, when Jesus calms the storm, and they were afraid of the storm, and then they see him calm the storm, and in the midst of divine presence, they are terrified now of him.

Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him. But more than that, we're ruined by the presence of a holy God because of our sin. One of Peter's early encounters with Jesus, again in a boat, after a night where they hadn't caught anything at all, Jesus says, put your nets out for a catch.

It's ludicrous, but Peter tries it, and he holds in the miraculous catch of fish. And as the nets are creaking and breaking with this vast catch, Luke says this, when Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees, and said, go away from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man.

He knew the answer to those questions in Psalm 24. In Psalm 24, it says this, who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

You need clean hands, hands that have never done anything wrong. You've never done anything wrong. And a pure heart, that you've only ever loved what God loves. And Simon is struck down by

Jesus.

[9 : 32] Isaiah is struck down in the temple. Water me. I'm ruined. It's not what people tend to think about God. The mantra of human religion, man-made religion, is do your best, and God will make up the rest.

And all through history, all across the world today, that mantra, if it's followed, it does one of two things. We either diminish God's holiness so that we bring him down to our level and we feel we can get over the bar, or we just downplay our sinfulness and maybe we go for some sort of appearance of being good people.

But fundamentally, we're just trying to artificially raise us up to God's level. When the reality is, which of us could honestly say, every minute of every day, I have done my best to have clean hands and a pure heart?

That is the story of my entire life. Clean hands, a pure heart. My conscience is clear. Romans 3 gives us God's verdict on our lives.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So that when people truly encounter God, we see that for ourselves, that the words are, water me, I am ruined.

[10 : 46] Depart from me, Lord. I'm a sinful man. Shortly after we first moved to Scotland, I shared an illustration of this. I got it from Vaughan Roberts. It's from the World Cup final in 1966 at Wembley Stadium.

The Queen had to present the Jules Rimet trophy to the winning captain. So she was up in the stands at Wembley Stadium wearing pristine white gloves, as the Queen does.

And the England captain, Bobby Moore, had to run up the stairs to collect the World Cup trophy from her. But he'd just played 120 minutes of rugby, of football, on a muddy pitch.

His hands were caked with mud. And he knew at the top of the stairs he'd have to shake hands with the Queen. So on the videos, you can see him as he runs up frantically trying to clean his hands on his grubby shirt.

So I told that story shortly after I arrived in Glasgow. And afterwards, Jim Somerville came up to me and he said, you English blokes never stop talking about that 1966 World Cup.

[11 : 50] So there was my wake-up call from Jim. You're in Glasgow now, pal. So anyway, the serious point is all around us are people who believe in God, but they have very little interest in Jesus Christ.

They don't think they need Jesus in their lives. Why is that? Why is it that so many people around us would say, yeah, they believe in God. They believe in an afterlife of some kind, but they're not looking into Jesus.

Why? It's because people are not afraid of meeting God. But God says meeting God is a really big deal. It's terrifying.

Instead of thinking of lots of people seem to think, I'm not afraid of meeting God because I know he's good. Maybe we need to think, I know God is truly good.

That's what I'm so afraid of about meeting him. Could the holiness of God actually be our biggest problem? So the holiness of God, it overwhelms you.

[12 : 51] It strips you. Thirdly, though, it heals you. Look with me again at Isaiah chapter 6, verse 6. 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 atoned for. The coal comes from the altar in the temple where the offerings for sins were made and they can make Isaiah clean.

And it points us forward to the atonement that God would provide. In Hebrews 9, verse 26, it says of Jesus Christ, He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Just as people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many and he will appear a second time not to bear sin but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

So that now it's Jesus who can say to us if we come to him your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for by his own sacrifice of himself.

[14 : 12] The very God whose holiness is our biggest problem also offers in himself the solution. And God's mercy to us is because he is holy.

In Hosea 11, 9 I was struck by this this week, God says this, I will not carry out my fierce anger nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim, his people, for I am God and not man, the holy one among you. I will not come in wrath. God's offer of mercy to us is not in spite of his holiness, it's because of his holiness, it's because he is set apart and holy that the holy God invites us and urges us to approach him as sinners boldly with full assurance if we can do that trusting in Jesus Christ.

So Hebrews chapter 10, therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

We could do that every day, wherever we are, and the deeper we have a sense of the holiness of God, the more his mercy to us will mean, the deeper our grasp of his mercy.

[15:36] It's extraordinary and it moves us, it changes us, that's our fourth point. His holiness overwhelms you, it strikes you down, it heals you, fourthly, it transforms you.

For Isaiah, that transformation was straight into mission as he heard God ask, whom shall I send? And Isaiah says, here am I, send me. And for us, the call is no less into mission today as God's people to make him known, but it's a mission where we're called, commanded, to be holy like him. Not to make ourselves holy, but because he's already made us holy. Again, in Hebrews 12, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

There is a trembling gratitude about being a Christian, that when you've come to Christ, we're no longer terrified of God, but we should still be trembling about God.

And that drives us to purity. Hebrews 12, 14, make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy. Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.

[16:52] What does that look like? Well, holiness is not about being somber all the time and never having fun. No, it's about being set apart for God, devoted exclusively to him and distinctive from people around us.

The striking thing is that's where we find it hardest to obey God, isn't it? Where he calls us to stand out from other people around us and be distinctive. We just don't like being looked on as foolish. We fall into the peer pressure. But could we see it as a privilege to be distinctive for a holy God? To be holy because our God is holy and he has called us to be holy.

We're already holy in his sight and he's saying be who you are, a holy nation. So in lockdown, it's distinctive to be generous with what we have, to be a good neighbor and friend and son and daughter when the world says look after number one.

It's distinctive to be disciplined in making time for God day by day in a world that can't be bothered. You just do whatever you fancy next. It's holy, it's distinctive to honor our commitments, to see our commitment to church and to our small group, as a commitment to a group of people that we keep in a world that says oh just wait and see if something better comes along.

[18:16] It's distinctive to work hard at home if you're working from home in a world that says you might as well slack off because your boss isn't really watching. It's holy to keep our minds and our bodies sexually pure in a world where anything goes.

It's holy to live for the future with our eyes fixed on heaven and the rewards there in a world that just lives for the moment and reward here and now. Make every effort to be holy God says without holiness no one will see the Lord.

So folks behold the holy God his holiness overwhelms you it strikes you down it heals you and it transforms you.

Let's pray together. Gracious God we praise you that you are a holy God that you are the uncreated creator in all majesty and glory and we are but dust that you are the consuming fire of moral purity and perfection and we are helpless sinners who need a saviour.

We praise you that you've provided that saviour for your incredible mercy offered because you are the holy God among us that it's because of your holiness that you give us mercy and offer us refuge and salvation help us therefore not to be terrified but to approach you without fear and yet to live our lives before you with trembling gratitude in reverence and awe holy because you are holy that through us the world might glimpse your character for their salvation that they would come to you and for your glory amen amen and Father will do you and listen to it as a you