

Holy, holy, holy

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- [0 : 0 0] And we're just keeping that passage open in front of you as we look through it together. Last week, Will, our three-year-old, looked at it and asked me where our house was. It's quite a big map, but Scotland is still kind of relatively small on it. So I sort of pointed to East Lothian, although I think my finger covered from kind of Glasgow to Newcastle. So it wasn't that precise, but I thought that would do. But then he said, where's the swimming pool? And then he said, where's his friend Charlie from Nursery's House? And he wasn't really that impressed when I just kept kind of jabbing back to the same bit of this big map. Because at his age, he can't comprehend the scale of our planet compared to the very little bit of the world that he knows and the town that we live in. He doesn't have a kind of a grasp of just how big the world is. That's beyond him. That's something that he will have to grow in his understanding of as he grows up.
- [1 : 0 1] And I think that is the same for all of us with God, isn't it? We cannot grasp just how big God is. We cannot get our heads around that. And we'll never be able to fully comprehend that. God is bigger than our understanding. And yet, that doesn't mean that we don't still want to try. That doesn't mean that we can't constantly be enlarging our picture of God. And as we said last week, that is one of the key themes of the book of Isaiah. A big picture of a holy God. That is something that we want to get from this book. And actually, as I've been thinking more about this and looking more through Isaiah, I've become more and more convinced that actually this big picture of a holy God is something that is so, so fundamental for us. Our picture of God is often kind of the issue beneath the issue, as it were, in the things we deal with in our life. And so many of the questions or challenges that we face day to day, we want kind of practical tips and tricks that will help us.
- [2 : 1 2] Even when we come to the Bible, we perhaps want a quick fix that will solve this thing that we're facing. And it is good to be practical. But beneath that, to build those things on, we need, first of all, this foundation of a big God. And so we want to be more committed in our walk with God. We want to break sinful habits. We want to take God more seriously. Actually, it's so easy for us to think, you know, there will be a kind of an ABC step plan to quickly make that happen. But actually, we need to first grasp that he is a big God and that he deserves our obedience. Or we want to be able to deal with the worries and the anxieties that our world kind of thrusts upon us. We want a quick solution to that. But actually, we need a big God who can be trusted with those things. Or we want to be more proactive in sharing the gospel with people we know. We want our family, our friends, our children to accept the gospel to be brought into the church. And there are ways that we can do that and learn to do that well. But again, first of all, foundationally, we need a big God who is worth speaking out about, inviting people to, and to give everything for.

[3 : 32] And we need this big picture of a big God. And Isaiah chapter 6 is a great place to see that as Isaiah himself comes face to face with the God who, as we just sang earlier, as we read in our passage, is holy, holy, holy.

This awesome picture of an awesome God. And yet a God who, in his word, reveals himself to us. We're going to look at Isaiah's encounter with the holy God and what grasping his holiness more means for us.

And so first up then, the glorious majesty of the holy God. Let me just read again the first four verses of Isaiah chapter 6. There are various things that I can say about these.

But in so many ways, these verses speak for themselves. And I cannot describe a bigger picture of God than what God himself has given us right here.

So do have a look down with me at these opening verses again as we read through them. In the year that King Uzziah died, so that's a key point here is this time of flux, a time of change, of uncertainty.

[4 : 41] But 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. That literally means the burning ones. So we can kind of put away our ideas of podgy little angels floating about. These are serious, powerful creatures.

It says each had six wings. With two he covered his face. And 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 threshold shook at the voice of him who called. And the house was filled with smoke.

A quick kind of bit of context where we are. We looked at Isaiah chapter 1 last week. We saw things were not well with God's people. We saw there was rebellion against the Holy God. Really chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 kind of re-emphasize that and repeat that story.

[5 : 49] And then we're brought here to Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah's vision of the Holy God. We see that while the human king has died, the year that Isaiah died, that God remains seated on his throne.

That his throne is above all other thrones. That he is worshipped by the heavenly beings who cover their eyes, cover their feet as they are humbled before him.

Holy, holy, holy, they called. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, a word would be repeated to show kind of fullness or completeness. So elsewhere it would say gold, gold.

And we translate that to mean pure gold. This is the only place in the Old Testament where a word is repeated three times. Holy, holy, holy.

The sheer magnitude and fullness and perfection. The completeness of God's holiness. His moral majesty as that word has been described is being revealed.

[6 : 50] The sheer otherness of God. We're told again that God is the Lord of hosts. The commander of heaven's armies. Again, emphasizing his unrivaled power and authority.

And yet also we see that that holy God, that God who is high and lifted up and above all things, is also very much here connected to earth. The train of his robe filled the temple that was the meeting point between God and man.

The whole earth is full of his glory. The seraphim call out. The holy God is not simply distant and unknowable, but is present and connected with his creation.

And verse four perhaps helps us in some ways kind of feel the scene. Feel what it is that Isaiah experiences. That the whole place is shaking. And that there is smoke coming forward.

And that verse there is alluding back to God giving the people the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Where again, as God was at the top of the mountain, there was smoke as the ground shook.

[7 : 57] And the people at the bottom of the mountain stood in awe and fear of the majesty of God. The holy God whose glory fills the earth.

And we could talk about these verses lots more. There's so much going on here. But really, I suppose the question that we have to ask, the question for us if we're here as a Christian this morning, is, is this God that Isaiah sees?

Is that your God? Is this God that the Bible describes? Is that your God? The God who is high and lifted up. His majesty is beyond our comprehension.

The God who the train of his robe, the corner of his garment fills and overflows from the temple, which would have been the biggest and most impressive building that these people had ever seen.

Is our picture of God personally? And not just the answer that we would give at church about God, but actually the picture we have of God, which is displayed in how we live our lives, in the choices we make, in our actions day by day.

[9 : 03] Is that God the one who even the heavenly beings shield their eyes and feet from? Whose voice makes the ground shake? Because that is the God of the Bible.

That is the God that we come to worship this morning. That is the God we live our whole lives before. And the Bible shows us the majesty of the holy God. The question is, is that our God?

And I suppose the follow-on question from that is, well, how do we get ourselves this bigger, this deeper, this fuller picture of God? How do we get that deep within ourselves? Perhaps you think if we were gathering this morning in a huge cathedral with an organ and a choir kind of belting out, Handel's Messiah or something like that, perhaps you might think, well, that would help.

That would get the hairs on the back of our necks to stand up. Maybe that's one way of enlarging our picture of God. That's not an option for us before anyone gets too excited that I've got some news to share.

You know, that's not an option for us. It's also, that's not how God says we primarily see his glory, his holiness. And so how do we grasp that holiness more, that we might live in light of it day by day?

[10 : 16] How do we do that here in a kind of fairly low-ceilinged room in a hotel? How did the early church do that as they met in people's homes? How does the persecuted church around the world do that as it meets in places where they can't be seen, but who have a view of God which is big enough for them to risk their very lives together to worship him?

How do we get this big picture of a holy God? We're told that creation, the heavens declare the glory of God, that is able to be seen by everyone, that is far more impressive than any structure humanity could make.

But even more than that, we're told that God's glory, his holiness, his character, his perfection, is revealed to us in his word, the Bible. As he shows himself to us in passages like this, we get to see behind the curtain, as it were, the glorious majesty of the holy God.

And so how do we get this big picture of God? Well, we need to train ourselves perhaps to stop, to think, to dwell on passages, just like this one that we're looking at this morning, to prayerfully meditate on verses like this.

You know, personally speaking, I found it a real help to me this week that this has been our passage, that I've been spending a lot of time reading Isaiah chapter 6, as I've been preparing for this Sunday, because also being reminded of this big God, this holy God, has helped me as I've been able to take that picture of God with me into different aspects of the day, into different aspects of life.

[11 : 53] Again, why not this week? Take two minutes. At the start of each day, you can set a timer or a reminder and read and dwell on Isaiah 6, 1 to 4. Praying that God would enlarge our vision of him.

Praying we would have a big picture of God to take into our decisions, to take into our worries, to take into our days, all the things that we face in our life. We see in these verses the glorious majesty of the holy God, and nothing is more significant than us coming to grasp that more and more and to build that within our lives.

Well, let's carry on then as we see next Isaiah's response to this glorious majesty that he's seen. We see, secondly, the gracious forgiveness of the holy God.

How would we respond if we saw God? That's a question perhaps we think we would say, well, this is brilliant. You know, this is the most amazing thing ever. There's God. Let's celebrate.

Let's have a party. Or people often say if they saw God, they would have a lot of questions. They wanted to ask him a few things. They'd like to understand. Stephen Fry famously said a few years ago, the first thing that he would say to God would be, how dare you?

[13 : 07] And he listed his various grievances against God. And yet actually we see in these verses that if we truly get the right picture of God, our response is none of those things.

Our response would be to say with Isaiah in verse 5, woe is me for I am lost. Isaiah sees the holy God and he thinks he's done for.

He's dead. Why? Well, he recognizes his sinfulness in the face of this perfect holiness. 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.

A proper view of God brings us to our knees because we see the gulf between his holiness and our sinfulness. We spend so much of our lives, don't we, comparing ourselves, comparing our performance to things and to people around us.

Maybe at times we think that we're matching up pretty well, we're doing what we need to do. Maybe at times we're worried that we're kind of dipping below expectations and we tell ourselves we need to kind of pull our socks off and work a bit harder.

[14 : 24] But actually when we see ourselves in comparison to God and that is the scale that ultimately matters, we see here that we realize that our situation is hopeless. Woe is us.

There is nothing that we can do, even the very best of us and our very best days looking at ourselves through our most rose-tinted spectacles are not even close to where we need to be.

Isaiah recognizes that here as he comes face to face with the Holy God and he despairs. But incredibly what we see here is the gracious forgiveness of the Holy God.

having humbled himself, having recognized reality really, his uncleanness in the face of perfect holiness. One of the seraphim we read takes a burning coal from the altar, comes to Isaiah, touches his mouth and pronounces forgiveness.

That forgiveness comes from the altar, from this place of sacrifice. It meets Isaiah at his place of felt need. He's declared that he's a man of unclean lips.

[15 : 33] It touches him on the mouth. And yet it offers this complete forgiveness. Those incredible words, your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for.

We see here how the path to being right with the Holy God has to first go through that valley of recognizing just how wrong with him we are in order that we can receive that gracious forgiveness that the Holy God offers.

And ultimately for us today, that forgiveness comes through Jesus Christ. That sacrifices, the sacrifices that took place on the altar in the Old Testament, the sacrifices of atonement where lambs and bulls, where animals would die in the place of the people for their sins.

They were always pointing forward to Jesus as the fulfillment of that, the true sacrifice. Jesus dies on the altar of the cross in our place that we might receive this forgiveness.

That is all God's work. That is all God's initiative. Just as we see here, Isaiah doesn't clean himself up. Isaiah doesn't make any promises about his future conduct. He doesn't do anything other than recognize his sinful state in the presence of a Holy God.

[16 : 49] And this cleansing comes from the seraphim who is at the throne via the altar to him. That forgiveness is all of God's grace for us.

It comes from God via the cross to us because of what he has done. It is mind-blowing, I think, that this Holy God that we've seen, this Holy God who should provoke in us that response, woe to me for I am lost.

That Holy God himself provides the way for our forgiveness and our coming into his presence. The gracious forgiveness of the Holy God.

The God of holiness is the God of grace. And so we worship him. We live our whole lives for him, not just because of who he is, but also due to what he's done for us in the gospel that means people like us can be brought back to this Holy God.

And it's the more that we grasp that, the more that we're moved to give everything to him in response to that. And that's what we see next in this passage here. Verse 8, And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send and whom will go for us?

[18 : 06] Then I said, Here I am, send me. Having seen God's majesty, having received God's forgiveness, Isaiah is then motivated and enabled to share God's message.

And that would be a really nice and kind of tidy place to stop and wrap things up here. It's kind of logical. There's this consistency to it. God has done this. We respond like this.

We go and tell others. And that is all true. But you'll have noticed perhaps as we read through the passage, actually that that's not the end of the story here.

This third section that we look at is the challenging message of a holy God. That's the passage quite often used at kind of commissioning services, people being sent out, go and tell people about this holy God, go and tell people about his exalted majesty, about his wonderful forgiveness, having received grace, share that grace.

And that is absolutely right that we hear that message. That is the right response. That is something that we're all called to engage in. And yet what is rarely then said is what God goes on to tell Isaiah, which is basically to say, and nobody will listen.

[19 : 24] Have I looked down at verses 9 and 10. Here are God's words. Go and say to the people, keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Make the hearts 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.

That's not the most encouraging kind of send-off for a missionary, is it? He doesn't tell him that until after Isaiah has already volunteered. And Isaiah, perhaps understandably, asks in verse 11, you know, how long?

Is this a long-term plan, really? And God's answer, verses 11, 12, 13, is to say, really, until the fullness of his judgment has come on these people.

Until there is nothing left, until there is exile, and the people are removed far away. And so as we continue reading through the second half of chapter 6, how on earth do we make sense of this?

- [20 : 28] Perhaps especially when other verses come to mind as well. We were speaking on Wednesday at our prayer meeting about the words of Jesus. The harvest is plentiful, Jesus says. How do we then make sense of this challenging message that says, no one will respond?

And notice, it's actually Isaiah preaching of this message that will dull the hearts of his hearers. So what do we make of this? Well, the first thing that we need to remember is the specific people that Isaiah is being sent to in his day with his message.

Say to this people, God says, who are this people? Well, if you were here last week, you might remember that this people are the people of God. These are the Old Testament people of Judah, the people who God had done everything for, had made great promises to, and yet who have turned their backs on him and have rejected God are in rebellion against the Holy God.

The consequences mentioned in these verses are what we call the covenant curses. The consequences God had promised his Old Testament people what would happen if they turned from him.

That ultimately they would be removed from the very land that God had promised and given to them. And so we need to grasp that. Isaiah's message isn't to stop people who've never heard of God from turning to him.

- [21 : 53] It is actually to clarify these people's rebellion against the God who has so clearly shown himself to them but who they've turned their back on and rebelled against.

It is cementing, really, that path that they have chosen. And it's in that context that actually Jesus himself quotes these verses from Isaiah when he's asked why he teaches using parables.

We often assume Jesus told stories to help people understand things. People say that a lot. But actually, that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says, just like Isaiah, and he quotes these verses, it is to bring this divide between those who've already rejected God and so won't listen and those who are eager to kind of dig in and to find out more about what God is offering.

And the Bible says, actually, the same process still happens whenever the gospel is being shared. That the same message of hope, inviting people to respond to Jesus, is also hardening other people's hearts if they refuse to listen to it.

It is actually leading them toward the judgment that is promised for those who reject God. The gospel message drives this wedge between people that we are one or the other.

- [23 : 12] We are those who trust in the holy God and receive his forgiveness. Or we are those who reject him and are destined for his judgment. You can see why we called this third section the challenging message of the holy God.

Because this is challenging stuff, isn't it? As we said last week, there would be. And yet, as we look at this challenging stuff, as we don't kind of duck this challenge, there's two really important things, I think, here for us to remember.

Firstly, is that none of us know, as we talk about this topic, none of us know how God is working in the different lives of different people. None of us are called or equipped or allowed to make judgment on the states of other people's hearts.

All we're called to do, just like Isaiah, in light of God's majesty and the forgiveness we've received through Jesus is to continue to hold that out to others.

We do that not knowing what the result will be. We're not responsible for how people will respond. But we do that knowing that whatever happens, God is at work. We're simply called, like Isaiah, in obedience to go and to tell.

[24 : 22] And then secondly, such an important thing here to know if you're here and you're not yet a Christian or still kind of asking questions, still wondering what it's all about. You're in exactly the right place. We're so glad to hear you.

For those that we know who are in that category as well, if this is a message here then that worries you, if your kind of response is, well, am I not able to turn and be healed?

Well, what's so important to remember here is that that option is always open to those who choose it. As we said last week, God will never turn away those who repent. God will never turn away those who, like Isaiah, recognize their brokenness in light of his holiness and turn to him in need of his forgiveness.

And yet, with that said, also to take seriously this warning that gradually, if we continue to reject God, our hearts can gradually become hardened until ultimately one day we'll refuse to make that decision.

The message here, the challenge here, is that if you hear God's call on your life today, don't delay that, don't put that off, don't think there's more important things at the moment. Because one day that might be too late.

[25 : 35] That is the challenging message of the Holy God given here in Isaiah. And that just leaves us to finish very briefly here with the promised hope of the Holy God.

As we just read and we saw last week, there's a lot that is stark, a lot that is tough as we make our way through Isaiah, especially in these early chapters that we're in at the moment.

But even in the darkest of moments, there is this light that shines through. God speaks about how his people, in rejecting him, will face judgment, will be taken away as they turn their back on him, that he will turn their back on them.

But still also, we see right at the close of this chapter that he will not ever forget his people. Even though that is what they deserve. Verse 13, I do have a look down there that as the rebellious people are kind of felled like a tree, leaving only the stump behind.

We're told that that stump is actually the holy seed who will put right all that is wrong in this opening of Isaiah. One author puts it like this, hope is the unexpected fringe attached to the garment of doom, that ultimately judgment will not have the last say, but restoration will have and does have the final word.

[26 : 58] And that holy seed of verse 13, we'll see this next week as we pick up in chapter 11, is this promised king to come. And in the promised king in Isaiah, we get to see a picture looking forward to Christ who for us today has come, who has made that forgiveness possible, who has opened up the way back to a holy God.

The promised hope of the holy God has been seen in judgment, in Jesus. And because of that, judgment will not have the final word. Through Jesus, we see God's glorious majesty.

And through Jesus, we receive God's gracious forgiveness. In light of Jesus, we share God's challenging message. But that challenging message always holds out the promised hope hope that is Jesus Christ himself.

The hope for us, the hope for our world to bring us back home to this holy God who is over and above all things. Let's pray together.

Let's pray.