

## Isaiah 6:1-8

### “Holy”

For Thanksgiving 2008, my wife and I agreed to host both our families. The problem was the timing. Our firstborn arrived six weeks prior, followed by a major move to west Kentucky while I was a full-time student launching a new ministry. It was a hectic and crazy time for us to unpack and prepare a home for two families to enjoy a major holiday. Given all we had on our proverbial plate, we selected a room to be the location for all the stuff that we had yet unpacked. Thus, when family did arrive, we showed off our new nursery, the dining room, and the rest all while hoping no one noticed the closed bedroom door.

Whether it's our homes or our lives, we all try our best to give the illusion that we are spotless and pure. But it is all a mirage. Holiness is a word we often use in Christian circles without clearly defining it. As a result, we often distort it with religious rhetoric that is nothing more than the appearance of righteousness, when in reality, it is much more.

Let's start with **The Word**. “Holy” is not a word we use outside of religious context unless, of course, you are Robin in the 1960's Adam West Batman. He, rather famously, would begin many sentences with the word – “Holy this, Batman!” or “Holy that, Commissioner Gordon!” But what does it mean? First, the word carries the idea of *Separation*. The verb literally means “to separate” or “to cut off.” This makes it clear that God is Holy Other. He is not one of us. He is separate from us. This aspect of holiness is demonstrated in the Law and the Temple. Much of it is defined by what is clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, inside and outside, sacred and secular, holy and unholy. The High Priest, for example, would isolate himself for a week before entering the Holy of Holies whereby he would undergo a series of washings and would wear pure, white robes. However, it would be inaccurate to retranslate “Holy” with “Separate.” The Seraphim are not singing, “Separate, separate, separate is the Lord of hosts.”

Secondly, “holy” carries the idea of *Uniqueness*. As the “Separate One,” God is unique in the cosmos (see Exodus 15:11; 1 Samuel 2:2). The uniqueness of God, expressed in his holiness, is often applied to objects. Only priests could wear an Ephod. Only the priests could enter certain areas of the Temple. Certain objects were excluded for Temple worship. God, in other words, is the “Holy Other.” He is unlike us fully and completely pure and glorious.

Finally, “holy” carries the idea of *Purity*. What separates God from his fallen creation is his absolute purity. He is holy without spot or blemish (see Habakkuk 1:13). We take this for granted. The gods of the ancient world were not pure. They were not holy. They were engaged in the same wicked acts as their worshipers from murder to violence to fornication to abandonment to revenge (Job 34:12).

But knowing what the word means is only half the equation. We must also care about **The Works** of holiness. Isaiah is confronted with God's holy essence, and he responds in three ways. The first is fear (vs. 1, 4-7). The passage opens by informing the reader that “King Uzziah died.” Uzziah became king at age 16 and served for over 50 years as one of the greatest Kings of Judah. He increased the military and grew Israel's economy. The death of Uzziah meant the death of an era and during this time, the Assyrians were marching toward Israel conquering everything in their path. There were plenty of reasons to be afraid. But then Isaiah meets YHWH himself! Isaiah does not belong here! The ancient Hebrews understood that God was so unique and pure that no man could stand in his presence and still live! The Lord is described as “sitting upon a throne” and “high and lifted up.” Both are expressions of power and might. He is above everything and exercises unlimited power.

Isaiah's response is one of fear. "Woe," is to bring a curse upon oneself. Isaiah, after seeing God in His glory and majesty, is frightened. He is unclean, unholy, and does not belong here! This is why we try to dilute holiness. We don't want to be confronted with our wickedness. There can be no hope and no redemption apart from such an encounter.

The second reaction is *Worship* (vs. 2-3). Isaiah is struck by God's presence and the ongoing worship service. He first highlights the choir of Seraphim with six wings. Each pair of wings had a particular function – with two wings they covered their face (even the face of divine beings can't behold the awesomeness of God), with two they covered their feet (lest they corrupt holy ground), and with two they flew. Their song is recorded in verse three beginning with the thrice repeated "holy, holy, holy." Ancient Hebrew emphasized through repetition. It was rare for a word to be repeated three times. This is holiness to the highest.

This is why boring worship is a theological crisis. It's amazing how standing on the edge of the grand canyon or staring into the abyss of space can overwhelm us to the point we wish time would stop, but the thought of standing before a holy God as boring says a lot about us. The Seraphim are not burdened with singing the praises of God, they have the best job in heaven. Poor worship reflects the heart of worshiper, not the One being worshiped! The problem is not the style of worship or when the songs were written or what instruments are utilized. What matters in worship is the heart of the worshiper. Understand that even the Seraphim, the Cherubim, the angels, and the divine counsel are unworthy to stand in his presence. How much more so us? The first sign that we do not know, appreciate, or love God as He is, is that our worship becomes stale and dry.

Finally, holiness is associated with *Redemption* (vs. 6-8). Despite the distance created by God's nature who is gloriously holy, he is not so separate and distant he is unwilling nor unable to draw humanity to himself. The reunion of the divine with the human is not the result of God lowering himself, but by purifying us. This is the theological basis of God's redeeming love and mercy. Salvation is not an entitlement; it is an undeserved gift tied exclusively to God's holy love. The holy God saves sinners for holiness. Salvation is not a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance nor is it God sweeping our sin under the proverbial rug, it is the holy God washing, restoring, and remaking the sinner to conform to his holy image.

In verses 5-7, Isaiah is purified by one of the Seraphim. This is an act of cleansing, redemption, and restoration. This is grace. Isaiah has done nothing to deserve this. He can only receive it. One of the beautiful aspects of Scripture is how the unholy is made holy. The reason the High Priest couldn't wear cotton when he entered the Holy of Holies is because cotton attracts dirt. This is true in general. Boys who bathe get dirty. Dirt doesn't get clean by bathed boys. However, when God shows up, he is so pure and holy, he is not stained or made unclean. What he touches becomes holy (see Matthew 8:1-4).

In CS Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*, the Pevensie kids have an interesting response to first hearing that Aslan is a mighty lion. "Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion," said Mr. Beaver. "Ooh," said Susan. 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.' 'Safe?' said Mr. Beaver, 'Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.'