

A HIGH VIEW OF GOD

Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah 6 records Isaiah's life-transforming vision of God and subsequent call to prophetic ministry. It is arguably one of the most well-known passages in Isaiah's prophecy. And rightfully so, for it contains the dramatic testimony of a sinful man who had a violent encounter with God and lived to tell about it. Isaiah's gaze was lifted above and beyond his physical surroundings and he received a vision of God that immediately, completely, and permanently changed his life. And God's Spirit moved Isaiah to record his testimony in order to call you and me to a high view of God. No, we cannot have Isaiah's personal vision of God. But we can, must, and need to have his resulting view of God. **A.W. TOZER** was right: **"The greatest need of the moment is that lighthearted, superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with his train filling the temple."**

In his book *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, JOHN PIPER writes of using Isaiah 6 as a pastoral experiment. He preached this text, trying his best to exalt the glory, majesty, and holiness of God. But he intentionally omitted any personal applications. The test was this: "Would the passionate portrayal of the greatness of God in and of itself meet the needs of the people?" A young family was present that day, which had just discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. Several weeks later, Piper learned about the incredibly traumatic story. The husband took him aside one Sunday after service and said, "John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of God's holiness that you gave me... It has been the rock we could stand on."

Here's the point: **YOUR VIEW OF GOD IS EVERYTHING!** **Jeremiah 9:23-24** puts it this way: *Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understand and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."* I repeat: A right view of God is everything. Without it, you have nothing. Only when God is put in the right perspective is everything else brought into focus. So let's walk through Isaiah's vision as it teaches us three essential elements of a high view of God.

I. GOD IS SOVEREIGN.

The Bible is clear that we cannot see God with the naked eye. **John 4:24** says, "God is Spirit." **1 Timothy 6:16** says that God "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see." And **1 John 4:12** bluntly says, "No one has

ever seen God." Yet Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord." How could Isaiah see the invisible God? Well, we get an indication of what Isaiah actually saw in the title ascribed to God: "The Lord." The title "Lord" is used here in verse 1. And it's also used in verse 3, but with a distinction. In verse 1, the L is capitalized, with the "o-r-d" in lower case letters. But in verse 3, the L is capitalized, with the "O-R-D" in small capitals. This is the translators' way of indicating that two different Hebrew words are being used in the original. In verse 3, and throughout the OT, when the word "LORD" is in all capitals, it translates the word *Yahweh*. Later, vowels were added and the name was pronounced "Jehovah." It's the proper name of the one true God that means **THE SELF-EXISTENT ONE**. But in verse 1 the word "Lord" is spelled with lower case letters. It translates the word *Adonai*, which is a title meaning **THE SOVEREIGN ONE**.

Notice that Isaiah did not see God's essential nature. Rather, he saw a vision of God's sovereign authority; which is further indicated in the fact that God was sitting on a throne. In verse 5 Isaiah says, "My eyes have seen the King." And let me add that **John 14:39-40** declares the rejection of Jesus' ministry to be the fulfillment of **Isaiah 6:10**. Then **John 12:41** says, "Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory." John says that Isaiah saw a **CHRISTOPHONY** - a preincarnate vision of Christ. Before the birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, Isaiah saw the Lord Jesus enthroned in heaven, the Uncreated reigning over all creation. This vision of the Lord enthroned in heaven gives us a descriptive definition of the sovereignty of God.

A. THE LORD IS ETERNAL.

Verse 1 dates Isaiah's vision: "In the year that King Uzziah died..." Uzziah was the 9th king of Judah. He took the throne at the age of 16, and reigned for 52 years. According to **2 Chronicles 26**, Uzziah was "marvelously helped" by God to lead Judah to political, military, and economic greatness. But when he became strong, Uzziah's heart was lifted up in pride to his own destruction. He defied God's sovereignty and violated God's holiness by intruding into priestly service. So God struck him with leprosy. And he died in isolation from the kingdom he built. But in the year Uzziah died, God revealed himself to Isaiah as the Holy One who is enthroned in sovereign authority forever. A hundred years from now, every head of state in the world today will be off the scene. But as these earthly rulers relinquish their power, God will still be sitting on his throne in heaven.

B. THE SOVEREIGN LORD IS TRANSCENDENT.

Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, *high and lifted up*." God's transcendence was revealed to Isaiah by the infinite height of his throne. Not

only is God still on his throne, when men have to give up their thrones. But while men occupy their thrones, God's throne is high and lifted up above all. **Psalm 46:10** says, *"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."* Let me translate that command to *"be still."* It basically means to give up, surrender, and quit striving; for God will be exalted above all the nations of the earth. **Philippians 2:9-11** says, *"Therefore, God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

C. THE SOVEREIGN LORD IS MAJESTIC.

Notice verse 1 again: *"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple."* In the ancient Near East, a king's greatness would be displayed by the length of his train. But while human kings competed with one another for greatness, Isaiah saw the all-consuming majesty of God, blanketing everything like an overflowing robe. You been to weddings, haven't you? And you've seen brides come down the aisle, with extra material flowing from the gowns. What's the longest bridal train you've ever seen? Well, whatever it is, I bet you've never seen a bride with a train so long that when the ushers finished stuffing it all in the room, it covered the pews and people. But when Isaiah saw the Lord, the train of his robe filled the temple. In **Jeremiah 13:22**, God speaks to his people about impending judgment, warning, *"And if you say in your heart, 'Why have these things come upon me?' For the greatness of your iniquity your skirts have been uncovered, your heels made bare."* God judges men by lifting their robes and showing their bare legs. But while man's skirts are lifted in shame, God's majestic train fills the temple.

II. GOD IS HOLY.

Holiness is arguably the most neglected attribute of God in the contemporary church. If asked to describe God, many Christians would mention his power, love, wisdom, or a list of other attributes, before they mention holiness. Yet in scripture, holiness is God's central, defining, and foundational attribute. In fact, the word the Bible uses to describe God more than any other word is *"holy."* And God is so holy that everything associated with God becomes holy. Thus, scripture speaks of God's name, word, law, promises, works, ways, wrath, and his people as holy. **R.C. SPROUL** has said, **"Any attempt to understand God apart from holiness is idolatry."** He's right, because holiness is what makes God God; which is why holiness is the most difficult attribute to define. Defining holiness is like defining God. It can't be done. But if we are

going to know God, we must understand the concept of holiness. And Isaiah's vision gives us a descriptive definition of the holiness of God.

A. GOD'S HOLINESS IS DISPLAYED IN THE SERAPHIM'S POSTURE.

Verse 2 says, "*Above him stood the seraphim.*" What are seraphim? The word "*seraphim*" means "burning ones." Every other place it's used in scripture, it refers to fiery serpents. But here, and only here, it refers to a special order of angelic beings. Apparently, they look a lot like humans. Verse 2 mentions their faces and feet and verse 5 mentions their hands. But they are unlike humans in two specific ways. First, the word *seraphim* - burning ones - tells us that they looked something like humans on fire! Second, they had six wings - with which they did two things. First of all, they flew. Verse 6 suggests they flew to fulfill divine assignments. But until given a specific assignment, they apparently hovered over the throne. Verse 1 tells us that God's throne was high and lifted up. Then verse 2 says, "*Above him stood the seraphim.*" Of course, this does not mean that they are higher than God in authority. Apparently, these seraphim hovered over the throne as guardians. They were God's supernatural secret service team. But while they used two wings to guard the throne of God from others, they used their other four wings to guard themselves from God's throne.

God's holiness is so great, his separation from his creation to infinite, and his moral excellent so brilliant, that the seraphim used two of their wings to cover their faces. It was too dangerous for them to look at God or have God to look at them. One day, Moses saw a bush on fire that wouldn't burn up. That shocked him. He had to get a closer look. But in **Exodus 3:5** God said, "*Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing in holy ground.*" Likewise, the seraphim were on holy ground above God's throne. They didn't have sandals to take off. But they did have wings. So they used them to cover their feet.

Notice how God's holiness is put on display in the seraphim's posture: four of their six wings were used to shield them from the consuming holiness of God. Think about that. In verse 5 Isaiah said, "*Woe is me, for I am undone!*" That is the appropriate response when sinful people enter the presence of God. But seraphim are not sinful. They are holy angels who guard the throne of God. Yet they are still creatures, so it is necessary for them to shield their eyes from a direct gaze at the face of God. That's how holy God is. God is not just set apart from sin. He is set apart from all creation. So even the angels that guard his throne had better beware, lest they become objects of his holy wrath.

B. GOD'S HOLINESS IS DECLARED IN THE SERAPHIM'S PRAISE.

Notice that the seraphim do not guard God's throne with fire, even though they are "burning ones," nor with their six wings. They guard the throne with antiphonal chants of high praise: "*And one cried to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.'*" The phrase "Holy, holy, holy" is often taken to be a reference to the Trinity. Indeed, the Bible clearly teaches that God is one in **Essence**, but three in **Person**. But that's not the primary meaning of this phrase. In biblical literature, repetition is used for emphasis. But note that God is not called, "Holy, holy." He's called, "*Holy, holy, holy.*" Scholars call it the **TRIHAGIOS** - the thrice holy God. To say that God is holy once is enough. To say that God is holy twice is emphatic. But to say that God is holy three times is superlative. That is, God is so holy that our minds cannot fully comprehend it and our mouths cannot fully express it.

Holiness is the only attribute of God that scripture mentions in triplicate like this. The Bible never calls God loving, loving, loving. Or powerful, powerful, powerful. Or wise, wise, wise. But it does say he's holy, holy, holy. In John's description of God's throne room, **Revelation 4:8-9** says, "*The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'*"

The seraphim cried out, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" None of us would naturally describe the earth as being full of God's glory. It's too full of hate, war, crime, etc. But the seraphim did not define the condition of the earth based on the evening news. They looked at the world through the lens of God's holiness and saw that God's righteousness will one day be vindicated in the world. So even with sin, sorrow, and suffering in the world, they were able to say, "*The whole earth is full of His glory.*" God's holiness and God's glory are inexorably linked together. If you see one, you automatically see them both. But miss one, and you fail to see them both. **Exodus 15:11** says that God is "*majestic in holiness.*" Notice how verse 4 records the effects of the seraphim's praise: "*And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.*" Isaiah was closer to any man since Adam. Yet he was never farther away.

III. GOD IS GRACIOUS.

Some years ago, a conference on comparative religions argued the question, what makes Christianity distinct from other religions. Is it Incarnation? No, there are other religions that claim God became man. Is it resurrection? No, there are other religions that believe that dead people can rise again? So what is it that makes Christianity distinct? While they debated, **C.S. LEWIS** wandered in late to the meeting. He asked that the subject was, and they told him. And Lewis responded by saying, "That's an easy question. The thing that makes Christianity unique is the doctrine of grace." He was right. The good news of amazing grace is uniquely Christian. Every other religion teaches people how to reach up to

God, in one way or another. But Christianity begins by declaring that all of us are sinners who can never earn the righteous merit needed to fully satisfy God's demands. But God in his grace has reached down to reconcile us to himself by the impeccable life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, *"By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."* God is gracious. And God's grace is seen in Isaiah's vision as the focus on heavenly furniture shifts. In verses 1-4, the focus is on the throne. But in verses 5-8, the focus is on the altar. If Isaiah's vision would have ended with this view of God's sovereign goodness, it would have been a living nightmare of condemnation, judgment, and wrath. What a tragedy it would be to have the throne without the altar, holiness without grace, and guilt without forgiveness. Praise God that God is a God of unmerited favor, sparing mercy, steadfast love, unfailing compassion, and unchanging goodness. And God's grace is seen in Isaiah's contrition, cleansing, and commission.

A. GOD'S GRACE IS SEEN IN ISAIAH'S CONTRITION.

There are many today who claim to have visions of God. And they are usually wonderful, joyful, even profitable experiences. So much so that some even write books, go on tour, and become religious celebrities from telling about their visions of God. But not Isaiah! Verse 5 reports, *"So I said: 'Woe is me.'" The word "woe" refers to more than grief, sorrow, and regret. It is a word of divine judgment. Yes, Isaiah declared judgment on himself. In fact, that's why this story of Isaiah's call is placed in chapter 6, rather than chapter 1. Chapters 1-5 record messages of judgment. And in chapter 5, the word "woe" is used seven times in sixth different messages of judgment. But "woes" usually come in sevens. So God placed this story logically, rather than chronologically, in order to show that the first "woe" was declared on the prophet who declared the other six. Isaiah said, "Woe is me! For I am lost." Undone. Ruined. Why? "For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." We are not told what sin of speech Isaiah was guilty of. But it doesn't matter. **Matthew 12:34** says, *"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."* Unclean lips are the result of an unclean heart.*

Isaiah was convinced that his unclean heart had ruined him. Here's why: *"For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."* Isaiah thought he was about to die in the presence of God. And that's the consistent disposition of those who have seen the Lord glory. In **Exodus 33:18**, Moses said to the Lord, *"Please, show me Your glory."* In response, God pledged to cause his goodness to pass before Moses. But in **Exodus 33:20**, God warned, *"You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."* In **Judges 6:22**, Gideon responded to divine visitation by saying, *"Alas, O Lord God! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face."* And in **Judges 13:22**, Manoah responded to the angelic announcement of the birth of Samson by

saying to his wife, *"We shall surely die, because we have seen God!"* And in **Luke 5:8**, when the Lord Jesus revealed himself to Simon Peter by giving him a miraculous catch of fish, Peter said, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* And when the glorified Christ revealed himself to John, **Revelation 1:17** reports, *"And when I saw him, I feel at His feet as dead."* Likewise, when Isaiah saw the Lord, he thought he was going to die. But he didn't. And that's the point. God graciousness is demonstrated in the fact that you ought to be dead because of your sin; yet, God has spared your life another day.

B. GOD'S GRACE IS SEEN IN ISAIAH'S CLEANSING.

After Isaiah's confession, God dispatched one of the seraphim from the angelic choir to minister to Isaiah. Verse 6-7 say, *"Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for. Iniquity refers to Isaiah's sinful nature and sin refers to Isaiah's sinful acts. God cleansed both. Notice how Isaiah's cleansing illustrates the sovereign grace of God that saves us through Jesus Christ. First, **ISAIAH'S CLEANSING WAS AUTHORED BY GOD'S WILL.** Isaiah thought he was about to die. He didn't think forgiveness was available. He didn't ask for it or expect it. But although forgiveness was not on Isaiah's mind, it was on God's mind.*

Likewise, **ISAIAH'S CLEANSING WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY GOD'S WORK.** The live coal that touched Isaiah's lips is significant because it was taken off the altar - the place of sacrifice. In **Leviticus 16:11-14**, we find that burning coals were a part of the sacrifice the high priest was to make for himself on the Day of Atonement, lest he die in the presence of the Lord. But God himself provided the offering of coal on Isaiah's behalf. Finally, **ISAIAH'S CLEANSING WAS AFFIRMED BY GOD'S WORD.** Not only did God assign the seraphim to apply Isaiah's cleansing; God also assigned the seraphim to announce it, saying: *"Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged."* And here's another reason why I know some of us don't have a high view of God. Because we are not awed, amazed, or appreciative for the forgiveness God has graciously provided through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

C. GOD'S GRACE IS SEEN IN ISAIAH'S COMMISSION.

Let me insert here that grace is free, but it's not cheap. Of course, it cost God his only begotten Son. And it cost Jesus his life. But grace also cost the one who receives it. It doesn't cost you in order to receive it. But it does cost once you receive it. And the text illustrates this in the burning coal that touched Isaiah's lips. It was so hot that verse 6 says that the burning one wouldn't touch the burning coal. He used tongs to take it off the altar and placed it on Isaiah's

lips. This teaches us that grace is free, but repentance is painful. And repentance is painful because God not only wants to cleanse your past sin; he wants to consecrate you for future service.

In verse 8, Isaiah overhears God speaking in his divine court, saying, *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* Isaiah wasn't a part of this conversation, but Isaiah butted in. He knew he should have been dead, but here he was alive and forgiven. So he said, *"Here am I! Send me."* He didn't even know what the mission was, but that didn't matter. Since God had spared him and saved him, Isaiah was willing to do whatever God wanted him to do. That's another reason why I know many of you don't have a high view of God. You got to beg us, twist our arms, or stroke us to get us to serve. But if you really understood what it means to be spared and saved and sanctified, you would say, *"Here am I! Send me."* Maybe that's why the church used to sing:

**USE ME LORD, IN YOUR SERVICE, DRAW ME NEARER EVERY DAY
LORD, I'M WILLING TO RUN ALL THE WAY
AND IF I STUMBLE, WHILE I'M TRYING, DON'T BE ANGRY, JUST LET ME STAY
LORD, I'M WILLING TO RUN ALL THE WAY**