

How Do We Respond to God's Holiness?

~Isaiah 6:1-13

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January 26, 2020

The sun gives our planet life. It keeps us in an environment so we can live. It causes plants to grow and life to thrive. Without it, we would all die. But we also need protection from the sun. If we don't protect our skin from its rays, we might get burns or skin cancer. If we look too long at it, we can lose our eyesight and even go blind.

Water is also essential for life. We need it to hydrate our bodies. Water also causes plants to grow and communities to thrive. Without water, we will die in a matter of days. But too much water can kill us. If we go underwater for too long or get in a spot where we can't breathe, we can drown.

The sun and water bring life yet can also destroy life. They simultaneously have power to give or take life. So we need to find that balance between receiving their life-giving benefits while respecting their destructive potential.

The same is true with respect to God. He can both give and take life. He brings life but also destroys life. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. God took the lives of the first born in Egypt. God even allowed foreign invaders to take the lives of Israelites during the time of Isaiah. Yes, God is love and life giver. But He also will bring judgment and take life. How do we relate to a God like that.

How do we respond to God's holiness? When you think about God as Holy, does that draw you closer to Him or drive you away? We can recoil from God's holiness. We might feel like a teenager watching a TV show with a bunch of friends. But they know their parents would have some concerns about the show. If the parent walks through the room, the teenager gets uncomfortable with the parent's presence. But as soon as the parent leaves the teenager and friends relax. We can feel like that with a holy God.

Or our response to God's holiness might be like people at a social setting who hear about a pastor or priest showing up. As soon as they realize the pastor's presence, they put on their best behavior. They tell clean jokes, good attitudes and speak well of everyone. But as soon as the pastor leaves they can relax and be themselves.

This can be how we feel with God's holiness. In some ways, holiness is so foreign to us that we're uncomfortable with it. Perhaps our image of holiness is tainted by the "holier than thou" person. They're usually Christians who claim holiness and always look for violations of holiness in others. They strongly express their opinions, judge others quickly and seldom show awareness of own flaws. This example of holiness drives us away and we can even project it onto God.

But Jesus lived a holy life. He experienced temptation yet was without sin. People flocked to Him. His holiness did not repulse them. Somehow it played a part in drawing them to Himself. So maybe holiness is something we need to look at more carefully.

We will do that today as we continue in Isaiah. Last week we saw the vision of Isaiah begin with God's response to lost people. The entire nation of Judah had lost its way. They abandoned the Lord even though they claimed to still follow Him. This led to their own weakening and vulnerability. So the Lord would send Isaiah to them to call them back. The first 5 chapters of the book reveal the nation's disobedience in greater detail. But all this really serves as an intro to Isaiah's ministry.

In our passage today, Isaiah speaks for the first time. He will encounter the Lord in all His holiness. We will see how the holiness of the Lord can give or destroy life. Then we will see how we need to position ourselves with respect to the Lord. So, we're protected from His destructive power but can receive His life-giving power.

Isaiah 6 (ESV) (491)

6 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. ²Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: "Woe is me! For 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!"

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

⁸And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." ⁹And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive."

¹⁰Make the heart 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.”

¹¹Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:

“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,

and houses without people,
and the land is a desolate waste,

¹²and the LORD removes people far away,
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

¹³And though a tenth remain in it,
it will be burned again,

like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains

when it is felled.”

The holy seed is its stump.

Isaiah speaks for the first time in the book in verse 1. He locates this vision at a specific moment in history – the year that King Uzziah died. He had reigned 52 years over the southern kingdom of Judah. He started well and led the people back to the Lord. Under his leadership, Judah prospered both spiritually and economically. But the prosperity went to Uzziah’s head. He concluded that his importance elevated him to a higher level than any previous king. So he boldly went into the temple in Jerusalem with incense as if he was a priest. No king had done this before. This action so alarmed the priests that 80 followed and confronted him about his pride. Uzziah got very angry and started to rage away at the priests. But the Lord struck him with leprosy. They rushed him out of the temple. He could no longer rule because of his disease. His son had to take over prematurely. So when Uzziah died, this cloud of uncertainty remained.

The Lord sovereignly decides to appear to Isaiah in a vision. According to Isaiah, he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. The Lord wore a robe and it’s hem, just the hem, filled the entire temple. Isaiah doesn’t describe the Lord beyond that maybe because He was indescribable.

Above the Lord stand creatures called seraphim. They appear to be a high order of angels that attend to the Lord. They apparently have flames surrounding them for some translate the word seraph as “flames.” They also have great power indicated by their six wings – 2 cover their faces; 2 cover their feet and with 2 they fly. One calls to the others “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts;”

Now remember what we've learned about ancient Hebrew? Instead of using a modifying word to heighten the intensity of a word, they simply repeated the word. So we saw two weeks ago that Isaiah 40:1 started with the phrase "Comfort, comfort, O my people." This meant the Lord brought great comfort to the people. But here the holiness of the Lord is repeated 3 times. So the Lord is not only holy, or doubly holy but triply holy. This is supercharged holiness. One commentator writes, "for the only time in the Hebrew Bible, a quality is raised to the power of three." Divine holiness is so far beyond anything our minds can grasp that a super-superlative has to be invented to express it. The seraphs also proclaim that the whole earth is full of his glory. This could mean that a day will come when the Lord's glory will fill the earth and everyone will see it. Or the Lord's glory already fills the earth but has not yet been fully revealed.

But this awesome visual spectacle does not only present a sight for Isaiah's eyes. The sound of the seraph's call shakes the temple to its very foundations. It might be similar to what we experience when a thunderstorm goes over our house in the summer time. The thunder clap shakes our house.

So this vision portrays the Lord as ultimately holy. But what does God's holiness mean? The word holy involves separation. So one definition of God's holiness goes like this - **He is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.** God is absolutely and completely separated from any sin or evil. He is devoted to His own honor and glory. This is not because God has a big ego. His devotion to His glory is the natural outflow of His holiness. It would be unholy for the holy God to hold back His glory. It would also be unholy of God to ignore the tainting or rejection of His glory. Ignoring it would seem to say "it's okay to not treat God as glorious. It's okay to diminish Him." So this an awesome and glorious vision of the Lord. It is not okay – God's Holiness can destroy those who do not respond appropriately. It's like the sun. By it's nature, it will burn or blind those who do not position themselves appropriately toward it. So this is glorious and awesome vision of the Lord.

Now what kind of response would you expect from Isaiah? How do you think you would have responded? Wouldn't we expect Isaiah to break into praise and worship? Wouldn't it be appropriate to join in with the seraphs and affirm the triple holiness of the Lord? Or maybe we might say something like "let's give God a hand. Good job God. You're holy and that's cool." But look at what Isaiah says. Verse 5 – And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost;

Those are not the words of a joyful worshipper. A "woe" was usually pronounced upon a people or nation under judgement. Isaiah pronounces a woe upon himself. He cries "I am lost." This does not mean Isaiah doesn't know where

he is. Another translation says “I am ruined.” The word ruined can also mean “to be silent.” It described a person who suddenly went silent because of some drastic loss or news of impending death. Such cries might come from someone just informed of bankruptcy or robbery of their home. Or it might come from someone informed of aggressive stage 4 cancer or from an ocean swimmer who turns to see the jaws of a killer shark. Isaiah thinks he is about to die.

Why? He is a man of unclean lips. In the presence of the Holy Lord of Hosts, Isaiah’s sinfulness becomes clear to Himself. This points to our need to constantly look to the Lord for the standard of holy living rather than other people. Most people compare themselves to others to gauge their moral standing. We can convince ourselves that we’re pretty good compared to the murderer, robber or prostitute. But we forget that Jesus said if we harbor anger towards another, it’s like we’ve murdered them in our hearts. And no one stands tall in the presence of the Holy God. In His presence, degrees of sin become irrelevant. The holiness of God reveals our true condition.

Who knows if Isaiah thought himself pretty holy before this moment? But he suddenly realize that he has spoken unclean words. He lives among a people that sin in their speech. Isaiah perceives that this vision of God’s holiness threatens his very existence. So just like the sun and water, **God’s holiness brings and destroys life (6:5)**. Perhaps Isaiah thought his life face immediate destruction. I mean, he’s in the presence of the Holy God. The holiness of God requires that He’s devoted to His glory and honor. Well unclean lips don’t honor the Lord. So Isaiah has to pay.

Yet the story takes a startling turn. A seraphim flies toward Isaiah with a burning coal from the altar. But instead of killing Isaiah, it touches Isaiah’s lips with the burning coal. It goes directly to the previously named source of sin on Isaiah’s body. Then the seraphim declares “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Now this is strange. Isaiah did not cry out for forgiveness or salvation. He simply recognized his own sinfulness in the presence of the Holy Lord of Hosts. Yet the Lord responds with an act of atonement and forgiveness. Yet the strangeness continues with the form of atonement. The key ingredient necessary for atonement in the life of Israel was blood. But here, for the only time in the Hebrew Bible, God uses fire for atonement. It perhaps symbolizes the purifying ability of fire to burn out impurities.

Yet we must marvel that the Lord initiates this. Isaiah has not really confessed and repented of his sins. He has just acknowledged them. Yet, the Lord respond positively. Maybe this give us some guidance on how we can position ourselves

to receive life from the Holy God and not destruction. Acknowledge our sin. So despite the initial terror, God's holiness brings Isaiah life.

How does God's holiness bring life (6:6-8)? It reveals the sinfulness of humans and their need for the atoning work of Lord. Verse 5 tells us that Isaiah suddenly realizes his own sinfulness. This was a key step towards new life with the Lord. As soon as that coal touches Isaiah's lips and the seraph speaks, Isaiah is reconciled with the Lord. Forgiven, he can also live out God's calling on His life. For look what happens in verse 8. "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" So the Lord talks to the other heavenly hosts or beings. He asks who they can send for a task they want carried out.

Isaiah's changed life shows up immediately in the second half of verse 8. He goes from devastated sinner to enthusiastic servant in just a few moments. Isn't Isaiah's response remarkable? "Here I am Lord, send me." Now if you or I were in that situation, what might we say? "Lord, I hear you're looking for someone to send out and go. Where exactly would this person go? What are you sending them out to do? What is the compensation? What's in it for me? Do I have some guarantees of protection for my family? Will it fit into my career plans? Will I like it and does it fit my gifting? Give me more details Lord. I would like time to think and pray about it. Then I will decide if you can send me or more accurately if we can enter into a partnership."

But Isaiah says none of that. He doesn't know what the mission requires or where he will go. He simply puts himself forward as a willing servant for whatever God needs him to do. The Lord accepts Isaiah's offer by describing the mission.

Verse 9 – And he said, "Go and say to this people." So this will be a speaking ministry. "Keep on hearing but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart 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." What kind of message is that? Why would God want people not to turn and be healed?

If we look carefully at this text, it seems like verse 9 contains the actual message and verse 10 describes the results of the message. In the ESV version which I use, they put in that little extra set of quotes around the words in verse 9. That means their trying to help us see that those words form the content of Isaiah's message.

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but don't perceive." But what does it mean? Verse 9 portrays someone who actually hears the message with their ears but does not understand it. They see the message

delivered but do not perceive in their mind its meaning. So it's like they hear the same message but they become more dull and blind to it. Or they're becoming dulled and hardened to it.

How does God's holiness destroy (6:9-13)? The continual proclamation of God's message and holiness will harden the hearts of those who reject it leading to their ultimate destruction. We see the Israelites have already hardened their heart to the Lord as demonstrated in Isaiah 1-5. But God will continue to send His message of repentance and hope to them. Yet if they continue to resist their heart will become harder until it will reach the point of no return.

This is not the first time in Israel's history when something like this happened. In the first message of this series, we talked about how Isaiah assumes we know the Hebrew Bible. Here's one place where such knowledge helps. In the book of Exodus, Moses confronts the Egyptian king or Pharaoh to let the Israelite slaves go. But he refused. So the Lord sends plagues upon Egypt. The text tells us initially that Pharaoh hardened his heart against the Lord for the first plagues. But then in the later plagues the Lord hardens his heart. So Pharaoh hardened his heart at the Lord's first set of messages. At some point, the Lord decided to complete the consequences of Pharaoh's heart choice. So the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart to the end and the Lord destroyed much of Egypt because of it.

Ironically, that was a good news story for the Israelites. But now they themselves have hardened their hearts towards the Lord. Isaiah is commissioned to proclaim the Lord's word faithfully. But the Lord tells him the people will for the most part reject this message. They will hear it but not understand it. They will see it but not perceive. So Isaiah asks in verse 11, "for how long will I preach." How will I know when I am done? The rest of verse 11, 12 and most of 13 reveal that he must preach until the nation is completely destroyed. The cities will lie waste without citizens. The land will be a desolate waste. The people will be moved far away. And though a tenth of the population remains, it will be burned again. There will be another invasion and destruction of the land.

So basically it will be too late for the majority of the people living in Judah during Isaiah's time. He will faithfully preach and they will mostly reject. Yet all is not lost. This testimony will be preserved for future generations. The Isaiah 8:11-17 scrolls describing this account will be stored away. Future generations will read about what happened. Hopefully, they will respond to the Lord's message before they also reach the point of no return.

But even in this message, there is a sliver of hope. Though Judah will be cut down like a tree and then burned, a stump of the tree remains. There will be a holy seed in its stump. What does seed do? It grows with a little water and a

little sun. So even though the message warns of the coming destruction, a holy seed remained. Just as the Lord intervened and forgave Isaiah the Lord will intervene to preserve a seed of His people.

So the Lord's holiness brings life and destroys life. Remember we thought earlier about Jesus living a holy life? Is it not interesting how Jesus' holiness also brought life or destroyed? Those who responded to Him with humility, faith and repentance found life. Those who rejected Him and His message became more hardened in their resistance to God.

So how must we respond to the holiness of the Lord? **We must humble ourselves before the Lord to live.** We need to first recognize the beauty of God's holiness. But we need to respond to the Holy God by acknowledging our sin and repenting of it. God responds to repentance with forgiveness and restoration. Then as forgiven people we plead for the Holy Spirit's help to walk in ways that honoring and glorying Him. This will lead to real life as God intended us to live it.

Maybe you have today found yourself where Isaiah was in verse 5. The Lord has revealed to you His holiness and your own uncleanness. But He also holds out to you grace, forgiveness and a new life in Him. Will you respond to His offer today with faith and repentance? You can receive Him into your life by trusting Him with all of your life. I will lead you in a prayer to that end in a moment.

To those of us already forgiven and reconciled, I want to encourage you to revel in the beauty of the Lord's holiness. We live in a world where so much is tainted and stained. We have seen so many examples of abuse of authority, misuse of position, corruption, breaches of trust, that we almost expect it from most around us. Yet this will never happen with the Lord. He has never sinned. He is far removed from sin and evil. His actions come from the purest motives and the greatest purposes. So we can rest in the holiness of God. In Him we still find truth, righteousness, integrity, honest and purity. He is a bright and shining light in the midst of our deceptive, self-worshipping, sullied world. So rejoice in the Holiness of our God

The Lord reaches out with grace and forgiveness to those who respond to Him in humility and repentance. We don't have to impress God or play games with Him or pretend to be someone we're not. When we're honest with Him, it opens up doors to a life close to Him. Once forgiven, we too can continue in that journey towards holiness in our own lives and fulfilling God's. So rest in and rejoice in the beauty of God's holiness. Then we must go hard after our Holy God and step forward with your "Here I am" when He calls.