

God's Holiness

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Isaiah 6

The greatest need of the church today is an encounter with the holiness of God. Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy [One] is understanding.” A cold, dispassionate analysis of God’s holiness might fascinate our minds, but it won’t benefit our souls unless our study of God is done in the pursuit of our personal and saving knowledge of Him in His holiness. What we desperately need is not only a renewed understanding of His holiness but an actual *reckoning* with Him in the majesty, purity, and grace of His holiness.

The various dimensions of God’s holiness are recognized by many theologians. A. A. Hodge said, “The holiness of God is not to be conceived of as one attribute among others; it is rather a general term representing the conception of his consummate perfection and total glory.” Thus, Hodge said, the Scriptures speak of God’s holiness as “his transcendently august and venerable majesty” and his “moral purity.”¹ This accords with the biblical testimony, which portrays God’s holiness as His transcendence as well as His moral perfection.

Both of these aspects can be seen in Isaiah 6. Using this passage as our textual guide, let’s peer into the prophet’s encounter with the holiness of God in its majesty, purity, and grace:

1. God’s majestic holiness
2. God’s moral holiness
3. God’s gracious holiness

1. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 163.

God's Majestic Holiness

The climactic Old Testament revelation of God's holiness appears in Isaiah's vision. Isaiah 6:1–3 reads, "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: The whole earth is full of his glory."

Isaiah saw the Lord on an exalted throne, transcendent in regal majesty. He reigns supreme over the affairs of men and is worshiped by the hosts of heaven. The emphasis of Isaiah's vision falls upon God's sovereignty and greatness. Note the titles used of God in verses 1, 3, and 5: "the Lord," "the LORD (*YHWH*) of hosts," and "the King." In verse 1, where Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord," the Hebrew title is *Adonai*, which means Ruler, Master, Sovereign, Exalted One. The vision vividly depicts God's supremacy over angelic powers and earthly kings. The greatest of men still die, but the Lord remains forever; "thy throne from generation to generation" (Lam. 5:19). Thomas Goodwin said, "He is separate and alone in his holiness, as he is alone in his being.... Now of all that could have been said or attributed to him, this sets up God the highest, and as most sovereign. And this, of all others, layeth us low, both as we are creatures and as we are sinners," for God's holiness "separates him from the creatures."² In other words, the holiness of God exalts Him without equal and casts down human pride into the dust.

Holiness is the peculiar glory of His divine nature. Edward Leigh said that God's essential holiness "is the incommunicable eminency of the divine Majesty, exalted above all."³ Herman Bavinck wrote, "He is rather called holy in a comprehensive sense

2. Goodwin, *Of the Creatures, and the Condition of Their State by Creation*, in *Works*, 7:15.

3. Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:102.

in connection with every revelation that impresses humans with his deity.”⁴ R. C. Sproul wrote that God’s holiness “signifies everything about God that sets Him apart from us and makes Him an object of awe, adoration, and dread to us.”⁵

God’s holiness reminds us that His difference from us is not merely quantitative, as if God were better than we are just because He has a longer list of things He knows, actions He can do, and places where He is present. It is not simply that He is ‘more holy’ than His saints, but that He is qualitatively different from us. He is in a category by Himself (*sui generis*). In Revelation 15:4, the sinless saints sing, “Thou only art holy.” God’s holiness, as Goodwin noted, implies that we should never treat God as if He were first on a list of beings, but, as the Holy One, He is *unicus*, the Only One who “stands apart by himself” from all our categories.⁶ Another writer put it well when he said, “There is a terrifying unfamiliarity in the things that God says about Himself.”⁷

The seraphim cover themselves in God’s presence, crying out “holy, holy, holy,” thus ascribing to God a holiness that even they fall short of—not because they have sinned, but because even sinless, immortal spirits are overwhelmed by God’s holiness and unapproachable light. Stephen Charnock said,

Holiness is the substance of God, but a quality and accident in a creature. God is infinitely holy, creatures finitely holy. He is holy from himself, creatures are holy by derivation from him. . . . Though God hath crowned the angels with an unspotted sanctity, and placed them in a habitation of glory, yet as illustrious as they are, they have an unworthiness in their own nature to appear before the throne of so holy a God. Their holiness grows dim and pale in his presence; it is but a weak shadow of that divine parity, whose light is so glorious that it makes them cover

4. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:220.

5. *The Reformation Study Bible*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 168.

6. Goodwin, *Of the Creatures*, in *Works*, 7:20.

7. Macleod, *Behold Your God*, 108.

their faces out of weakness to behold it, and cover their feet out of shame in themselves.⁸

The Scriptures hail the holiness of God as His crowning attribute. Thomas Watson said, “Holiness is the most sparkling jewel of [God’s] diadem.”⁹ Yes, God is love, and He is just, wise, and good, and every attribute He possesses is one with His nature, identical and co-extensive with His entire being, consubstantial within the simplicity of the divine essence. But it’s especially God’s holiness that radiates through all His attributes and makes each one shine with a peculiar splendor. John Gill noted, “It has been thought to be not so much a particular and distinct attribute of itself, as the lustre, glory, and harmony of all the rest; and this is what is called ‘the beauty of the Lord’ (Ps. 27:4).”¹⁰

God’s glory is the outshining, the brilliant display, of His holiness.¹¹ Just think of the most beautiful thing you could imagine. What would it be? Majestic mountains, a renaissance painting, a symphony by Bach, a Caribbean sunset over crystal blue waters? Well, compared to the beauty of divine holiness, all those things are profane and base. The most ravishing things on earth are but faint reflections or dull images of God’s beautiful holiness which shines in inapproachable, radiant splendor. We were made to contemplate this glory, and, as Augustine said, our hearts will be restless until they find their rest in beholding Him in His superlative, soul-satisfying beauty.

8. Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864–1866), 2:195–196.

9. Thomas Watson, *Puritan Gems; Or, Wise and Holy Sayings of the Rev. Thomas Watson, A.M.*, ed. John Adey, Second Thousand. (London: J. Snow, and Ward and Co.; Nisbet and Co.; E. F. Gooch, 1850), 66.

10. Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 104.

11. “His glory (*câbod*) is His manifested holiness...just as, on the other hand, His holiness is His veiled or hidden glory.” Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 7 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 125.

All throughout the Scriptures, holiness correlates with both glory and beauty. The psalmist declared, “Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary [Holy Place]” (Ps. 96:6). David thirsted “to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary” (Ps. 63:2). The “one thing” he desired of God was to dwell in His temple “to behold the beauty of the Lord” (Ps. 27:4). And Isaiah promised, “Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty” (Isa. 33:17). When we view the holiness of God in His “brilliant splendor,” we feel compelled to cover our faces, as it were, crying out, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts!” Seeing His beauty causes us to be irresistibly attracted to holiness so that we desire, above all, to reflect His image “in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24).¹²

It has been said by many a theologian that the highest task of theology is the contemplation of God—to gaze upon Him through His own self-revelation in the Scriptures and to be beautified by this contemplation. A true view of God ushers us beyond the speculative into the transformative, because the true knowledge of God brings us into encounter with His holy presence through the atoning blood of Christ. As His holiness shines into our hearts through the Word, it illuminates us, humbles us, convicts us, enlivens us, purifies us, and beautifies our souls. Are you, dear believer, being beautified continually by beholding the beauty of God’s holiness in the Scriptures? There is no substitute for this. Secondhand knowledge of God will not suffice. You must know and encounter the triune God as “the Holy One,” or else you must perish from His presence as an unholy thing.

Holiness demands our worship of God and is central to it. God’s holiness stirs “awe and dread,” but at the same time His people are “fascinated” and “entranced” by the Holy One.¹³ The seraphim in Isaiah’s vision both covered their faces and sang God’s

12. Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:135.

13. Reymond, *What Is God?*, 183–84. Reymond summarized the thesis of Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 12–40.

praises, evidencing *dread and delight*. A high view of God leads to a high esteem for worship. If we lose sight of God's holiness, we will lose fervor and fear in our worship. Joseph Pipa says, "We worship Him because of who He is.... One of the reasons, therefore, our worship totters on the edge of irrelevance is because we do not come into God's presence aware of who He is."¹⁴ Jeremiah Burroughs (c. 1600–1646) wrote, "The great reason why people come and worship God in a slight way is because they do not see God in His glory."¹⁵ On the other hand, when we encounter God in His holiness, it either propels us into glad worship or threatens to destroy us for dishonoring His holy name.

Let us, therefore, give our fervent, heart-felt worship to our triune God. When we adore Him, earth offers up a faint echo of heaven's thunder. The seraphim Isaiah speaks of are angelic creatures created for worship. The title seraph in the Hebrew literally means "burning one"—lit aflame with the fire of God. Psalm 104:4 says God makes His angels "a flaming fire." They burn with holy fire, burning with zeal to worship God in the splendor of His holiness. Their entire being is lit ablaze and taken up with the act of worship, purest worship. And if we get a glimpse, just a small glimpse, of the greatness of our God, we will find that we too are impelled to worship Him with all our mind, heart, strength, and soul. Our apathetic prayers, half-hearted devotions, sluggishness in service, irreverence in worship, will be transformed into fervent activities set ablaze by the fire of God's holiness, radiating with reverent delight that beautifies all that we do in the service of the King.

God's Moral Holiness

That God is holy has massive moral implications, beginning with the righteous character of God Himself and reaching to the moral

14. Joseph Pipa, *The Worship of God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005), 63, 65.

15. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 86.

character and conduct of all angels and men. The holiness of God is somewhat like the sun. Its massive presence exerts pervasive force so that all things within the solar system must revolve around its brilliant glory. However, God's presence is infinitely more pervasive. Nothing in creation lies beyond or outside of the influence of His holiness. God's holiness in its moral dimensions can be best appreciated if we consider its relationship to three things.

First, consider its relationship to God's glory. The Lord's holiness entails His purpose to glorify Himself in all that He does, for He alone is the glorious God. If He is supremely sacred, then He must honor Himself as such and require others to do the same, or He would deny Himself. The angels cried, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). Goodwin concluded, "Holiness is that whereby God aims at his own glory."¹⁶ James Ussher said that God's holiness means that "he most justly loveth, liketh, and preferreth himself above all."¹⁷ Leigh wrote, "God's holiness is that excellency of his nature, by which he gives himself (as I may say) unto himself, doing all for himself, and in all, and by all, and above all, aiming at his own pleasure and glory."¹⁸ The Lord commands us to love Him with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our strength (Deut. 6:5), but God alone is able to love Himself with an infinite love, and thus He alone is infinitely holy.¹⁹

Therefore, we may speak of God's moral holiness not as a separate attribute from God's majestic holiness but as another dimension of the one divine holiness. This is the aspect of God's holiness that the Christian tradition has emphasized historically: holiness as the virtue or perfection of God's nature.²⁰ Holiness is defined more narrowly as God's moral purity and settled opposi-

16. Goodwin, *Of the Creatures*, in *Works*, 7:15.

17. Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 3rd head (52).

18. Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:102.

19. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:115, 117.

20. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.4.63 (87); Polyander, Walaëus, Thy-sius, and Rivetus, *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, 6.39 (1:177).

tion to all impurity.²¹ He is the “Holy One” who is “of purer eyes than to behold evil” and cannot “look on iniquity” with approval and pleasure (Hab. 1:12–13).

In the moral realm, too, God's holiness denotes His separation and supremacy. The moral holiness of God is the absolute righteousness of His whole nature. It sanctifies all that God does and puts divine glory in all His works. Without holiness, God would be a terror to us. Leigh said, “Holiness is the beauty of all God's attributes, without which his wisdom would be but subtlety, his justice cruelty, his sovereignty tyranny, his mercy foolish pity.”²² With holiness, however, all of God's attributes shine with amazing loveliness.

Second, consider God's moral holiness in relationship to our sin. Isaiah understood this truth with painful clarity. The divine vision broke him and threatened to destroy him. In verse 5, he recalls his sinfulness and the sinfulness of the people he is associated with: “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” We swim in sin like fish swim in water. But when Isaiah was taken up into the atmosphere of heaven, he was like a fish out of water. The sights were terrifying, the sounds were sublime, the very air was dense with the luminescent smoke of the divine presence.

But why did he confess this about his *lips*? Why does he confess the impurity of his lips of all things? It's because of the praises of the seraphim. Isaiah's unclean lips stand in contrast to the purity and power of the praises of the heavenly hosts. Their worship was untainted and unhindered by sin, and they could not cease to praise God nonstop, so overwhelmed were they at the sight of His glory. So thunderous was their praise that the very posts of the door were shaken by the reverberation of the sound (v. 4). And that shook and jolted Isaiah to the core of his being.

21. Polyander, Walaeus, Thysius, and Rivetus, *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, 6.40 (1:179); Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:102.

22. Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:104.

Isaiah recognized that he, in comparison, had little regard for God. He had never praised Him as He ought. The weight of God's holy glory so penetrated his being that it *constrained* praise from him, but he could not praise because he was so overcome with a sense of his unworthiness. He saw himself as unworthy to even speak a word to God's praise, so the only recourse left in the light of such weighty, overwhelming glory was *simply to die!* So he cries out, "Woe is me!"

And notice what he confesses; not just his profane speech, not just the words that he did and did not say, but the *lips* that make utterance. And he traces the sin of his speech to its root in his being. "I am a *man* of unclean lips"—a *man* of profane speech. He's saying, "My person, my humanity, is characterized by inherent taintedness and fallenness and corruption. My sinful actions by sinful words betray my sinful nature, revealing the plague of my own heart."

This all seems so awful, so awesome, so dreadful! It reminds us of Isaiah 8:13, where the prophet said, "Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." But this is precisely what proximity to God will necessarily elicit from sinners. And this is how a genuine work of grace normally functions in its beginnings. In the beginning of the creation God said, "Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). And when God begins to make us a new creation by grace, the first thing He does is say, Let there be light in their hearts. He shines the light of His holiness into our hearts to awaken us to the knowledge of Himself and the knowledge of ourselves, and He bombards our understanding with a sense of His holiness.

When the conviction of the Spirit works in the heart of a sinner, the conscience is awakened from its slumber and sins come to mind and come to light. As Moses said, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Ps. 90:8). Sins that we once saw as small become grave transgressions. Little peccadillos become monstrous atrocities in the light of God's infinite holiness and worthiness. We say with David in the fifty-first

psalm, "I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me" (v. 3). We cease to justify and rationalize our sin, and instead we confess it, we abhor it, we forsake it, if only we can get its burden off our conscience. We cry out for "truth in the inward parts" (Ps. 51:6). The gravity of our transgressions becomes commensurate with our sense of the enormity of God's holiness and glory.

So we should ask ourselves: Do I know anything of this humbling work of the Spirit? Have I ever caught a glimpse of God's holy glory? Has my heart ever been pierced and cut asunder by His penetrating purity? I'm not just talking about the disturbings of natural conscience but the piercings of the Spirit's sword into the very joints and marrow, to expose the thoughts and intentions of the heart in all their impurity in the light of God's holiness. And if you have experienced this, then the question is: what did you do with it? Because conviction alone is not salvation or sanctification. God convicts us to lead us to a recognition of our guilt and misery, so that we would hunger and thirst for His righteousness, so that we would long for His grace and goodness in salvation and set our hearts on seeking Him (see Matt. 5:6).

Third, consider the relationship between God's moral holiness and our holiness. The moral excellence of God's holiness blazes forth in His law, which itself is "holy, and just, and good" (Rom. 7:12). God's perfection is the standard for our moral character and one of our most important motivations for our religious practice. God's entire moral code flows out of His holiness. Human holiness is whole-minded and wholehearted obedience to God's law. The "law of the LORD of hosts" is "the word of the Holy One of Israel," so we must not despise it (Isa. 5:24). Therefore, Christians must live "as obedient children" who do their Father's will, heeding the call, "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:14-16, citing Lev. 11:45; 19:2). Watson said that our holiness consists "in our suitableness to God's nature, and in our subjection to his will."²³

23. Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 85.

Personal holiness is possible only because God's "holy calling" has powerfully gripped us, "not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9). God is saving his chosen ones "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13). The Father loves His children and wisely disciplines us through painful trials "that we might be partakers of his holiness," that is, have "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:10–11). We must pursue holiness because without it no one will see the Lord (v. 14).

J. C. Ryle describes "what true practical holiness is": "Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God...hating what He hates—loving what He loves—and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word." A holy person will "endeavour to shun every known sin, and to keep every known commandment." He will "strive to be like our Lord Jesus Christ." He will pursue meekness, patience, gentleness, self-control in word and deed, self-denial, love, kindness, mercy, purity of heart, fear of God, humility, and faithfulness in all his responsibilities. A holy person "will endeavour to set his affections entirely on things above, and to hold things on earth with a very loose hand."²⁴ This is the character of the holy Lord Jesus, and it will increasingly become the character of all united to Him by a living faith, especially as they follow Him, growing in conformity to Him by diligence and suffering under God's gracious hand.

It is well to remember that, unlike our justification, our sanctification in this life is always a work in progress and never complete, since, as the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 114–15) says, "Even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God." Yet this small beginning gives us hope that we shall

24. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1956), 34–38.

“arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come,” through Jesus Christ.²⁵ And thanks be to God that in Christ He has made provision for us to become by grace what we are not by nature.

God's Gracious Holiness

The moral excellence of God's holiness appears both in His judgments and His acts of grace and mercy. Rev. G. H. Kersten said, “The attribute of God's holiness is a terror to the wicked, to whom He is a devouring fire and everlasting burning, so that the wicked shall not dwell with Him. On the other hand it is a source of comfort and salvation for those who fear Him, and out of love to His perfection, seek to flee from sin, and to perfect their holiness in the fear of God.”²⁶

Grace is an important aspect of divine holiness for Christ's sake. The Lord said, “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isa. 57:15). This is the wonder of holiness: it both exalts God infinitely above all creation in eternal transcendence and brings Him near to those broken over their sins so that He tenderly renews them. God's very holiness is the reason why He will not destroy His covenant people but will redeem them (Isa. 41:14; Hos. 11:9).²⁷

In Isaiah 6:6–7, we read, “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.” Upon beholding the sovereign majesty and glorious holiness of God, and upon being penetrated to the core of his being with the light of God's purity, and crying out in

25. *The Three Forms of Unity*, 109.

26. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:86.

27. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 29.

abhorrence of sin, Isaiah receives three wonderful and astonishing *gracious* blessings.

The first is the pardon of his sin. “Thine iniquity is taken away.” It’s gone! Removed! This was free forgiveness by the sheer mercy and grace of God. Isaiah did not merit it, and he certainly didn’t deserve it. He didn’t try to bribe God or coerce God’s favor through self-concocted works of righteousness. He didn’t promise to make amends; he didn’t make a vow that he would try to do better in the future. He simply *confessed* and *received*. He deprecated himself and his sin and he had nowhere else to look but to God’s pure grace. When you see God’s holiness for what it is, you realize that all your works are as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). You realize that you have the sentence of death in yourself, and you realize that your only hope is in the God who pardons by His sovereign mercy alone (see Rom. 9:15).

But the meaning of the text goes deeper than that. Because when the seraph says to him, “Thy sin [is] purged,” the Hebrew word that is used here, in the passive voice, can literally be rendered, “atoned for.”²⁸ The word is associated with blood atonement in Numbers 35:33. You may be familiar with Leviticus 16, which speaks of the Day of Atonement. The Jews have a name for this even to this day. They call it Yom Kippur, the Day (*yom*) of Atonement (*kippur*). Our text has that same word in its verbal form. It’s saying, Your sin is *atoned for*!

Now if we know anything about how atonement and pardon works, we know that the Bible teaches that the atonement for the life or soul of the sinner can only be accomplished through the shedding of blood. Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” But where is the blood in Isaiah’s vision?

28. William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 163.

The answer is in the symbolism of the burning coal. This was a coal from the altar of burnt offering. In the outer court of the temple, there was a bronze altar. And upon that altar, the priests of Israel would burn the animals that they had previously killed by the letting out of their blood. So, the altar burned with fire day and night; it was to never go out, symbolizing the blazing purity of the Lord, whose holiness is as all-consuming fire (Deut. 4:24). The animals, after shedding their blood, would be burnt on this altar to make atonement every day. The fire of judgment would consume the victims as substitutes for the people, and the people would receive God's blessing and not be consumed with the fire of His wrath. The burning coal in Isaiah's vision is a prophetic symbol—it bears the symbolism and significance of the altar on which atonement was made. Alec Motyer comments, "The live coal thus encapsulates the ideas of atonement, propitiation, satisfaction, forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation."²⁹ So when the coal is touched to his lips, it's understood that all of this redemptive significance comes with it.

Isaiah's atonement ultimately did not come from the earthly temple altar, however, but from the heavenly altar in the heavenly temple. In his vision, he is seeing the archetypal temple in glory that the book of Hebrews talks about (chs. 8–9). The temple on earth was but a picture of heavenly reality. It bore sacramental, symbolic significance of eternal salvation truths. And the book of Hebrews tells us that the heavenly temple is all about Jesus Christ and His work of redemption. So, Isaiah's sin was atoned for ultimately by the One he wrote about—by the Suffering Servant led as a lamb to the slaughter, who was crushed for Isaiah's iniquities on the cross (Isa. 53). Jesus Christ was consumed with the fire of God's fury and He went through Hell on the cross to save us from the all-consuming fire of God's blazing holiness in eternity.

29. J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 82.

When Christ was forsaken by God upon the cross for our sins, He was especially conscious of God's holiness. In Psalm 22, which He quoted on the cross, after crying out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" the psalm follows that with the declaration, "But thou art holy" (v. 3). The eyes of the Holy One cannot look with favor upon iniquity (Hab. 1:12–13). Thomas Boston said, "There is nothing wherein the divine holiness and hatred of sin is so manifest as in the sufferings of his own dear Son. This was a greater demonstration thereof than if all men and angels had suffered for it eternally in hell-fire."³⁰ Yet it was precisely God's holiness that evoked Christ's trust that God would faithfully save Him and all His people (Ps. 22:3–5). Christ's death satisfied God's holiness, for on the cross He "sanctified" (*hagiazō*) His people (Heb. 10:10, 14; 13:12). From beginning to end, Christ's obedient sufferings were engraved, as it were, with the words engraved on the golden plate of the high priest, "Holiness unto the Lord."

The second thing Isaiah received was cleansing, purging, purification. The coal symbolized the atonement made on the altar, but it was also a "live" coal, a *burning* coal. Fire purifies, and this symbolized the cleansing effect of God's grace in application. Isaiah 4:4 talks about purging away the filth of the daughters of Zion "by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning." In salvation, the Holy Spirit comes like a purifying fire of judgment upon our sin, purging our pollution and sanctifying us by the communication of His holiness to us so that we would live in holiness unto Him.

And that's how salvation works, dear friends. It brings pardon and purification, justification and sanctification, forgiveness and cleansing. There is no forgiveness of sin without also experiencing cleansing from it. We cannot remain filthy and unclean as a people of unclean lips. God sanctifies our lips to His praise. He sanctifies our hearts to His devotion. He sanctifies our hands to His service. So, the proof that you've been justified is that you are being

30. Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 1:102–3.

sanctified. Without evidence of sanctification in our lives, there is no reliable way to prove that we have been justified. To receive the benefits of Christ's justifying work is inseparable from receiving the grace of the Spirit's sanctifying influence.

God's moral and gracious holiness pervades the Trinity revealed in the gospel. Jesus Christ is "the Holy One and the Just" (Acts 3:14), who perfectly fulfilled God's law and deserved no punishment. We may trust Him entirely, for He is holy and true (Rev. 3:7). The name "Holy Spirit" sets the third person of the Trinity apart from every unclean spirit (Mark 3:29-30) and distinguishes Him as the divine agent to sanctify those people in whom He dwells so that they live for God's glory (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The gospel is a message of the triune God's holiness: holiness in judging sinners, holiness in redeeming sinners, and holiness in sanctifying sinners. How sweet, then, is the holiness of God when we encounter it through faith in Christ!

Finally, the third thing Isaiah received is the assurance of pardon. The seraph assures him that his "iniquity is taken away." He assures him of pardon and peace with God. God made Isaiah to know the joy of His salvation. The dread and despair left, and peace and assurance flooded his soul with a sense of relief. Gratitude for such a great salvation animated his resolve to offer himself as his Lord's servant. So Isaiah cried out, "Here I am! Send me!" When we realize how great and glorious salvation is, our gratitude moves us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices for the sake of His cause. When we see the holiness of God, not in despair but in faith, it fills us with zeal to join our song with the seraphim and to pray, "May the whole earth be full of Thy glory, Lord! I long to see that day, and I'll do whatever I can to hasten that reality!"

In Christ, the searing holiness of God has become our salvation. Though God remains a "consuming fire" who requires our "reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28-29), by faith we may boldly "enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19). The God who sent Christ to give eternal life to sinners is the "holy Father" (John 17:11). God's holiness guarantees His sworn promise that the

kingdom of Christ, the Son of David, will not fail (Ps. 89:33–35). In swearing by His holiness, God has sworn by Himself, and He would cease to be God if He did not completely save those “who have fled for refuge” to this Great High Priest (Heb. 6:13–20). In Jesus Christ, Christians can fulfill Psalm 99:5. “Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy.” Yet their freedom to approach God’s holy presence does not make Him any less holy, “for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee” (Isa. 12:6).

Dear friends, Isaiah’s encounter with the Holy One was a paradigm for what God wanted the nation of Judah to experience. And it’s a paradigm for what He wants us all to experience as well—not through direct prophetic revelation, but through the illumination and application of the Spirit as we’re exposed to the holiness of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Conclusion

The right human response to God’s holiness is the fear of God. He is “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises” (Ex. 15:11). David prayed, “In thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple” (Ps. 5:7). God’s Word aims to move people to “fear this glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD” (Deut. 28:58), for “holy and reverend [fearsome] is his name” (Ps. 111:9). This fear arises not merely from a dread of God’s holy judgment but from an experience of God’s holy salvation. The Lord said that when He restored Israel, “they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel” (Isa. 29:23). Bavinck said, “To sanctify him is to fear him.”³¹

Sinful fear of God drives people away from Him, but godly fear of God attracts us to Him. The fear of God must beautify and vivify our theology. Too often, man distorts the doctrine of God to create a god in his own image. The result is a banal but comfortable theology for sinners—marked by doctrinal error and

31. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:220.

practical irreverence. Martin Luther said to Desiderius Erasmus, “Your thoughts of God are all too human.”³² Let us follow the Holy Scriptures to an awe-inspiring view of “the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy” (Isa. 57:15).

The general decline of godly fear among professing Christians today is directly related to an ignorance of God's holiness. John Murray said that the core of the fear of God is “the controlling sense of the majesty and holiness of God.”³³ Wilhelmus à Brakel said that God's holiness is “the brightness of all His perfections,” and God “reveals Himself as holy, in order that the heart of man may continually be filled with deep awe and reverence.”³⁴ Mary's adoration of her Savior led her to say, “Holy is his name” (Luke 1:49). John Calvin commented, “The name of God is called ‘holy’ because it is entitled to the highest reverence; and whenever the name of God is mentioned, it ought immediately to remind us of his adorable majesty.”³⁵

We dare not neglect God's holiness or the reverence that it inspires, for the fear of God is essential to Christ-centered spirituality (Isa. 11:2–3; Acts 9:31). Murray wrote, “The church walks in the fear of the Lord because the Spirit of Christ indwells, fills, directs, and rests upon the church and the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit of the fear of the Lord.”³⁶ The fear of the Lord is the very life breath of God-centered obedience (Eccl. 12:13). It teaches us to value the smiles and frowns of God more than the smiles and frowns of people. It declares God to be big and people to be small. It is “a fountain of life,” pouring out energy for the Christian to do his duty. Murray said, “The fear of God is the soul of godliness.”³⁷

32. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *LW*, 33:47.

33. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 237.

34. Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:121–22.

35. Calvin, *Commentaries*, on Luke 1:49.

36. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 230.

37. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 229.

It esteems the smiles and frowns of God to be of greater value than the smiles and frowns of people.

Is your worship sluggish? Is your obedience half-hearted? Do you find yourself easily distracted by worldly desires and anxieties? Have you shrunk back from opportunities to speak up as a witness for the Lord? Seek a renewed sight of God's holiness in the Word. Pray, "Unite my heart to fear thy name" (Ps. 86:11). "Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he shall be for a sanctuary" (Isa. 8:13-14). When by grace you honor God's holiness, you will find that His holiness is and will be your hiding place. Praise God for His majestic, moral, and gracious holiness!

Amen.