

Isaiah 6:6-8 "Sinful People in the Presence of a Holy God" [1]

Main Idea: As we consider Isaiah's experience in Isaiah 6:5-8, we'll see that there are 3 steps we need to take if we are to be right with a holy God.

- I. Admit your Guilt (5).
- II. Accept His Cleansing (6-7).
- III. Avail yourself for Service (8).

Last week we began a new series on "The Holiness of God." I confessed then, as I do again today, that I feel severely inadequate to stand before you addressing such a great subject, and for many reasons: One, the more I study God's holiness the more I realize how much I have yet to learn about it. Two, the more I learn about God's holiness, the more I see my lack of holiness. And yet this I know. Once we begin to grasp the fact that God is holy, we'll never be the same again.

Stephen Charnock, a seventh century Puritan pastor, wrote the classic two volume book, *Discourses Upon the Existence and Attributes of God*. He has one hundred page section on the holiness of God alone. Concerning God's holiness he writes, "This is the crown of all his attributes, the life of all his decrees, the brightness of all his actions: nothing is decreed by him, nothing is acted by him, but what is worthy of the dignity, and becoming the honor, of this attribute." [2]

Case in point—the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah topped the list of "Who's Who in Israel " in the eighth century B.C. He was not only a prophet, but the prince of the prophets. It was from his pen that God revealed that the Messiah would enter human history through a virgin (7:14), that the Messiah would be "Emmanuel" (9:6), that would die a horrible death to pay for our sins (53:3), that he would establish a great kingdom (4:2), and so much more.

Yet one day, this upstanding man Isaiah came face to face with the holiness of God. And he was never the same again. He describes his call to the ministry in chapter 6. Let me read for you, from last week, what Isaiah saw, heard, and did, as recorded in Isaiah 6:1-5.

READ Isaiah 6:1-5

Isaiah was devastated by the holiness of God. Someone might toss out the suggestion, "Well maybe that was just Isaiah. Maybe God's presence doesn't affect the rest of people that way." Okay, before we continue in Isaiah 6 and see what happened to Isaiah after this exposure to God's holiness, let's address the objection. What have others done when confronted by the presence of a holy God? Let's look at four biblical examples.

Minoah

Who was Minoah? You can read about him in Judges 13. He was Samson's father. Before Samson was born, Minoah's wife was barren (2). God sent an angel to her and told her she would bear a son (3). She told her husband the news. Minoah pleaded with God to send that messenger again (8). So God did. Minoah offered a sacrifice. Do you remember what happened next? Notice the text t...

13:20 "For it came to pass when the flame went up...the angel ascended..."

13:20 "And Minoah...fell on their faces to the ground."

13:22 "...We shall surely die, because we have seen God."

So what happens when you realize you're in the presence of a Holy God? Minoah fell on his face. Perhaps that was just Mino ah. Let's look at another example...

Habakkuk

[Do Bible lands geography review: Divide room up into countries]

Habakkuk lived 100 years after Isaiah. He was a prophet and something bugged Habakkuk. He was a godly man, but his people were wicked. So he questioned God...

Objection #1: God, what are you going to do about the sin of Israel ? (1:1-4)

God's answer--"I'm going to raise up the Babylonians!" (1:6)

Objection #2: God, how can you do that?! They're more wicked than us! (1:12ff)

So guess what Habakkuk did? He went up on a tower, sat down, and waited (2:1). Uh oh! What happened next? Guess what God did. He told Habakkuk, "Wait a minute Habakkuk. You said you didn't understand my plan. You don't need to understand. I am God. You just live by faith (2:4)." God's answer climaxed in Habakkuk 2:20, "But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

How did Habakkuk respond then? Simply put, he was afraid (3:2), he trembled (3:16), and then he rejoiced (3:18).

A Modern Day Objection: "Are you kidding me? He trembled before God? I don't like that. Why would God make me feel uncomfortable?"

Have you ever walked through the woods... and turned over a rock? What happened? The tiny bugs scurried and scattered. Why? To get out of the light.

People are like that. Jesus said, "Men love darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). The natural man cringes when exposed by the light of God's holiness.

Job

You remember Job. Let's do a quick review of his life...

ch 1-2 Job lost his possessions, family, reputation, and health

Job 3:1 tells us, "After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth." And then from chapters 3-37 Job pours out his lament to his friends and to God, saying in essence, "What's going on God? Where are You God? Have you forgotten me God? God, I want answers."

Then what happened? In chapters 38-41, God gave Job answers! By the time he was done, Job was saying, "I don't want answers anymore!" Let's look at what Job experienced that day...

38:1 "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind..."

38:2ff. "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will

question you, and you shall answer Me."

Then God bombarded Job with a host of questions: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? (4) Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place? (12) Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? (32) Do you send lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, Here we are? (35) Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? (39:1) Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? (19)"

God asked Job question after question. "Job, can you do this...and can you do this...and can you do this, *like I can and do...?*"

How did Job respond? Job 40:3-4—"Then Job answered the LORD: 'I am unworthy ['vile' in the KJV]—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.'" And in Job 42:6, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

Objection: "My, oh my! Job sure had a bad case of low self esteem!" No. Job had a correct self esteem. He thought he knew God, and he thought he knew himself. Until God spoke to him. Until he came under the scrutiny of a holy God. And then he realized how little he really knew God, and how little he knew himself.

Joshua

Joshua had an encounter with God in Joshua 5:13-14 (actually, with the commander of God's army). His response? He fell on his face (5:14). Why? Because of what he heard in Joshua 5:15, "The commander of the LORD's army replied, 'Take off your sandals, for *the place where you are standing is holy.*' And Joshua did so."

There's no getting around it. Holiness makes people feel uncomfortable.

Did you ever notice what a crowd of people will do when a pastor walks into their presence? More than once, when I used to play pick up games of basketball with guys I'd hear, "Oops, sorry for that slip of the tongue, Preacher." Why the apology? Because of the position. Even ungodly people recognize that a pastor is associated with (or supposed to be associated with) God.

Think about it. If a mere human representative of God makes people feel uncomfortable, how much more so will God Himself! Why? Because He is holy! And because His holiness threatens us. Because His holiness reminds us of the cracks in our armor. Minoah fell on his face. Habakkuk trembled. Job clammed up in shame. Joshua hit the ground.

Objection: "I don't believe like that. I don't believe in a God who upsets people. I don't believe in a God who allows people to go to hell. My God isn't like that. My God is a God of love."

Wait a minute! *YOUR* God? How many Gods are there? There is only *one* God, and He is who He is, not who we may want Him to be. Is He loving? More than you can imagine, but we'll never fully appreciate the love of God until we come to grips with His holiness.

Sometimes, quite frankly, God does things that don't make sense to us. He must deal with sin. Sometimes He does so in shocking ways, not just with "big" sinners but with His own people.

Stephen Charnock observes, "He [God] doth sometimes punish it [sin] more severely in this life in his own people, than in others... Moses, for one act of unbelief, is excluded from Canaan, when greater sinners attained that happiness... Perhaps, had a profane man touched the ark, the hand of God had not so suddenly reached him; but when Uzzah, a man zealous for him, as may be supposed by his care for the support of the tottering ark, would step out of his place, he strikes him down for his disobedient action, by the side of the ark... A gardener hates a weed the more for being in the bed with the most precious flowers."[\[3\]](#)

Which raises the question... How can sinful people be right with a Holy God? Isaiah shows us, by his own example. As we consider Isaiah's experience in Isaiah 6:5-8, we'll see that there are 3 steps we need to take if we are to be right with a holy God.

I. Admit your Guilt (5).

Isaiah did. I need to remind you that Isaiah was probably one of (if not THE) the most righteous, upstanding, God-fearing, religious, reputable people of his day. But when he came into the presence of a holy God, what did he do? Did he rush out of the Temple to the courtyard and shout, "Come everybody, come and see!?" No. He crumbled—verse 5...

"Woe is me"--Curse me! Pronounce judgment on me! Why?

"I am undone"--I'm coming apart at the seams, disintegrating, crumbling. Why?

"I am a man of unclean lips"--I have a dirty mouth, a reflection of a dirty heart!

"for mine eyes have seen THE KING"

When Isaiah was confronted with God's holiness, he was overwhelmed with his own sinfulness. So what did he do? Did he try to run and hide? No, where could he go? Did he try to shift the blame for his sinfulness? ("It's not my fault I'm the way I am God. It's my parent's fault, my teacher's fault, my environment's fault.") No.

Isaiah admitted his guilt. R.C. Sproul says it well, "Nothing terrifies us more than to be in the presence of the Holy One. Why? Because we are not holy."

Have you ever admitted the fact that you are guilty before God? A lot of people struggle with guilt. Some try to cover up guilt (with alcohol, with work). Some try to shift guilt. Some try to ignore guilt. Isaiah admitted his guilt.

Have you acknowledged your guilt to God? There can be no freedom from guilt until there is admission of guilt.

You say, "Preach it, Pastor! There are some pretty guilty sinners in this community. *They* need to hear what you're talking about right now." *They* need to hear? I need to hear this. And so do you.

Stephen Charnock preached a sermon entitled, "The Chief of Sinners Saved." In it he talks about the predicament of the "good" person, the moral church member. His observation is worth pondering:

"Man's blameless outward carriage and freedom from the common sins of the times and places wherein they live, many times proves a snare of death to them, and makes them more cold and faint towards Christ: because they possess themselves with imaginations that Christ cannot but look upon them, though they never so much as set their faces toward him. And because they are not drenched in such villainies as others are, their consciences sit quiet under this moral carriage, and gall them not by any self-reflections. Therefore when the threatenings of the law are denounced against such and such sins, these men wipe their mouths, being untainted from those sins that are thus cursed, and vainly glory in their gay and gaudy plumes, and bless God with the Pharisee, that they are not sinners of such a scarlet dye, and that they do such and such duties, and so go on without seeing a necessity of the new birth. By this means the strength of sin is more compacted and condensed in them." [\[4\]](#)

Isaiah was a good man, but watch how this 'good' man responded when confronted with God's holiness. He

admitted *his* guilt first, then the guilt of sinners around him. Verse 5 again—“‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...’”

What did God do? Did God say, "Isaiah, don't be so morbid. You have a guilt hang-up!" No. Did God say, "Suffer you miserable creep. Wallow in your guilt. You deserve it." No. There was no cheap grace, nor whimsical vengeance. Watch what God did.

Read verses 6-7 "Then flew one of the seraphim..."

Here's step 2. To be right with a holy God, we must...

II. Accept His Cleansing (6-7).

I cringe as I read this account. The seraphim are the "fiery ones." God sent one of the seraphim to the altar. He picked up a fiery coal with a set of tongs. Fire is an image of God's holiness. Fire can be terrifying. Fire can destroy, but it can also cleanse.

He took the fiery coal from the altar. What altar? Possibly the altar of incense which stood just in front of the Holy of holies. Lev 16:12 tells us that coals of fire from the altar were taken inside the Holy of Holies once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

What's going on? Isaiah was guilty. He needed cleansing. He needed an atonement. Atonement is possible only through sacrifice. God does not ignore sin. He forgives sin, but forgiveness demands sacrifice.

Watch this carefully. What did the seraph do with that white hot coal?

V 7 “With it he touched my mouth...”

Oh! On his mouth?! Do you know how sensitive your lips are? The coal was not placed on the calloused bottoms of his feet, as painful as that would have been. The burning coal was placed on his mouth. Why?

What was Isaiah's problem? V 5 "I am a man of unclean lips. I've got a dirty mouth. And my dirty mouth is merely a reflection of my dirty heart."

What happened when the fiery coal touched Isaiah's mouth? It formed an instant blister. The coal cauterized his lips. The coal brought healing to his mouth, and cleansing to his dirty heart. How do we know that? That's what the seraph said...

V 7b “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Holiness is something we cannot earn. We must *receive* it. The seraph announced to Isaiah, "You don't have to curse yourself any longer. Your guilt is now gone."

You say, "That live coal must have hurt!" Listen. The price of repentance is very painful! Salvation is free, but it is not cheap.

The cross is the "live coal" that touches our lips, that purges us.^[5] When the cross touches us, it makes us pure. Oh friend, do you know why Jesus Christ died on the cross? Because God is holy! Listen. Because God is holy, He must judge sin. His holiness demands that He pour out His wrath on someone, either upon us, or upon a substitute sin-bearer. That's what the Bible means when it says that Jesus died for our sins. For those who believe in Jesus there is no condemnation. The guilt is gone.

How can sinful people like us be right with a holy God? There's only one way. We must accept God's cleansing for our sin.

Do you know what is tragic? The world is full of people, and you may be one, who are trying to make themselves holy. They're trying to clean up their lives so God will accept them. They're trying to earn God's favor. Is it possible? Listen to Isaiah himself who wrote this in Isaiah 64:6, "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags..."

We can't make ourselves holy. Only God can make us holy. How? Listen again to Isaiah, for he gives the answer in Isaiah 61:10, "He has clothed me with garments of salvation..."

To be right with God, you must have a wardrobe change. You must exchange your best efforts to please God (God calls this 'filthy rags') for His Son's meritorious life and death (God calls this a 'robe of righteousness'). This exchange takes place by faith alone by means of God's grace alone.

E.g.—

There was a third step in Isaiah's experience that shows us how sinful people can be right with a holy God. One, admit your guilt. Two, accept His cleansing.

III. Avail yourself for Service (8).

Verse 8 begins, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying." Previously he heard the seraphim speaking, now the Lord. Now, having been cleansed, he hears God's word. And what does he hear God saying?

Verse 8—"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Go where? The next verses will answer that, to preach His Word to the people of Judah .

Isaiah responds (8b), "Here am I; send me."

Then God responds in verse 9, "And He said, Go!"

One moment Isaiah had a dirty mouth, and was crumbling in shame. The next moment he's availing his mouth for God's service. What made the difference? God's gracious, transforming work in his life that produced three very specific responses. There, in the presence of a holy God, a sinful man did three things: He *admitted his guilt* before a holy God. He *accepted the cleansing* provided by that holy God. And he *availed himself for service* to that holy God.

Isaiah was thrilled with the privilege of serving God. Are you?

Some people refuse to serve the Lord. You have to twist their arm so they'll use their time and energy for the Lord. If you don't want to serve God, you don't understand God's grace towards you. As we grasp how little we deserve God's salvation, there's nothing we won't want to do for Him!

Beloved, only a holy God could make sinful people like us holy! And He has chosen to do so through the atoning, sacrificial work of His Son, Jesus Christ. And the work His Son accomplished is our incentive for *working*, not working to merit salvation but working to make His salvation known to others.

Are you living a self-surrendered life? I didn't ask, "Did you once a long time ago surrender your life to God for service?" but "Are you now in the place of surrender to Him? Are you available to Him for His purposes? Is it your greatest passion in life to know and serve Him?" He is worthy. The Holy One is worthy!

******Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

recommend his video series and book on the subject.

[2] Stephen Charnock, Vol. 2, p. 114.

[3] Stephen Charnock, Vol. 2, pp. 120-1.

[4] Stephen Charnock, “The Chief of Sinners Saved.” <http://www.puritansermons.com/charnock/charnoc2.htm>

[5] Observation by J. MacArthur