

Only a Holy God

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[0 : 0 0] Great, so for a little while this evening, we're going to look back at Isaiah chapter 6. And up till now, we've been looking at the introductory chapters of Isaiah, the first five chapters, which really set out what Isaiah is telling the people, which is not really great news.

It's news about his own judgment coming on his own people because they've turned away from him, turned their backs on him. There's a message of judgment and a message of hope, which the first 39 chapters of Isaiah focuses on.

And it's like we're given a slight interlude here in chapter 6, and Isaiah tells us about his commissioning. He tells us about his call and about this remarkable time where he met with the living God in the most astonishing circumstances, and it is recorded for us.

I have to say, it feels like an impossibly difficult passage to preach from. I feel entirely inadequate to preach from this chapter.

But that's what we're called to do. And so do it for a little while this evening. What we do need desperately is the strength and the insight and the power and the help of the Holy Spirit to take from this chapter something that will bring us a little bit closer to the living God, to understand him a little bit better.

[1 : 3 9] And I crave your prayers for me, but also for yourselves, that God in His mercy will look down on us and help us to understand this amazing passage.

Because a bit like the people of Israel, I think in many ways, because humanity doesn't change that much. We spend our lives trying to understand God on our own terms, and certainly the world that isn't Christian seeks to do that all the time.

People need God to justify Himself from our perspective. We need Him to explain Himself to us.

We hold Him accountable all the time. We put God in the dock throughout our lives in so many different ways. In other words, naturally, without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, we demand that God is subservient to us.

We demand that He is below us and that He answers us, because as I think we saw last week when Cori unpacked chapter 5, ultimately, the challenge is that we know better than God, that we have more answers, that we reject His omnipotence, and naturally we reject His sovereignty over our lives and our accountability to Him.

[3 : 0 9] We're very uncomfortable with that truth. And if you speak to people who are not Christians, they are exceedingly uncomfortable with the concept and the idea of being accountable to God, of God being sovereign over their lives and indeed over the world in which we live.

And I think even as Christians, when we come to faith, when we grow in our Christian lives, His love certainly changes us. I certainly hope it does. I hope it changes you and I hope it changes me and helps us to see differently through the Spirit.

But there's no doubt that we face a battle, an ongoing battle as Christians, and that battle is when we come to Christ that we remember the words of Romans chapter 12, that we are living sacrifices, but the trouble with living sacrifices that we often find, and you have been here for any length of time, you'll have heard me quote this before, the difficulty is that we crawl off the altar so much, the altar of service.

We don't necessarily like that position of serving the living God, we crawl off that altar. We struggle so often to see God's justice as reasonable because so often we're looking at it and trying to justify ourselves to a world who don't believe.

And we often choose to fear mankind rather than fearing God. We find it easier to be accountable to people than we do to be accountable to the living God.

[4 : 45] And our God becomes very small and people become very big so that we are afraid of them and afraid of their responses and of their rejection rather than of what God thinks of us.

And that's exactly what happened to the people, God's people in the Old Testament here who had been redeemed by God from slavery in Egypt, who had been taken through the Red Sea and through the wilderness and into the Promised Land, who had been promised many, many blessings and were to be a light to the world around them, showing the world around them the living God and the grace of the living God.

But their God had shrunk terribly and he had become a small God. And they justified rejecting Him and ignoring Him. And they despised Him despite everything He had done on their behalf.

And they were unwilling to see themselves as God saw them, as needy, as sinful, who could be forgiven and dependent on the living God. They were enslaved by the fear of the nations around them and by being accepted or being indeed crushed by these nations.

They were not living by faith, they were living by sight. They enjoyed the independence of living without God and they were proud as a result.

[6 : 13] And again, I think we saw that last week. And Corey preached on that. And then interestingly, in this, we had this staff meeting in the morning downstairs and I was reading from a passage, not a biblical passage but a daily reading, which I thought was very opposite to what Corey had been saying the night before.

And I'll quote it, it said, we fall into thinking what multitudes of our lost forefathers thought. We buy into this one fateful thought that perhaps we're smarter than God, that maybe our way is better than His way.

Only grace can deliver the deluded from the danger that they are to themselves. And I thought that fitted very well with where Israel and Judah were in relation to God and sometimes where we can be.

Now obviously, our circumstances are very different to the Old Testament circumstances. But I think the message remains the same for us in our lives as we reach out to God for rescue and renewal this evening.

Can we look just for a few minutes at Isaiah's encounter with God and try and grasp one or two very important things for ourselves if we can and seek that God's Spirit will speak through His Word.

[7 : 38] And we always need that. I know, I just feel more conscious of needing it, which is maybe a good thing, but it's maybe a bad thing that I'm not more conscious of it from week to week and should be.

So we've got this incredible vision that Isaiah has of the living God in his temple and of the seraph that surround the living God and say, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the Lord of the armies, the Lord of the heavenly hosts.

And I think the one thing that this passage is seeking to teach us is that God is not like us.

He's not like us. Now there's, we know there's ways in which we are made in this image and that we can relate to Him and that there are communicable characteristics and attributes of God, but this passage is reminding us of who God is that He is thrice holy, holy, holy, holy just means separate.

That's exactly what it's teaching us that He is...there's a...underneath the root word of separateness or brightness that this is who God is, that there is an absolute and complete difference between ourselves and the living God.

[9 : 01] He's divine. We're not divine. We are human and we need to remember that. We're mortal. We'll not be long here. Someone was telling me recently talking about people and that the vast majority of people by the third generation have been forgotten, even by their families, by the generations beyond them.

And we're mortal. We come when we go, but God is immortal. He is everlasting. He is utterly pure and there's a purity about Him that this holiness seeks to speak about.

We are not like that. We are impure at that level. Our thoughts are not perfect and good and right. He's incomparable and He is unequal.

It's very difficult to try and get across because I don't fully understand, and none of us do fully understand this living God. But Isaiah himself in chapter 40 towards the end of the book, Isaiah 40 in verse 25, he reminds us of who this God is, Isaiah 40 and 25.

He says, you know, to whom then will you compare me? He is incomparable and He is so different from us, utterly incomparable.

[10 : 26] There's no one like Him, says the Holy One. And we can't... So it's difficult to speak about someone that we can't compare to anything else.

But He sits sovereign on the throne of the universe. A picture of Him on a throne with His train filling the temple. Immovable, with total authority over all creation as the uncreated one, the source of all life.

Self-existing, infinite in glory, the commander of the heavenly hosts of angelic beings that we can't even see.

This great invisible spiritual realm that He is sovereign over, as well as the created world, the universe and humanity.

It's impossible. It's simply impossible. I think for Isaiah, and I think if it's impossible for Isaiah, how much more for us to do Him justice.

[11 : 34] And we can only pray that the Holy Spirit will enable us to see a little bit more of who God is. So we have this great cry, this great song of praise from the Seraph who are here, the Seraphim, and they worship Him at these remarkable beings.

Big, strong, holy, angelic beings who surround the throne, these created, pure beings themselves.

Sinless beings, fiery ones is what the word Seraph means. And they were clearly powerful and clearly holy and clearly serve the living God, even in this world in which we live though we can't see them.

And they reveal their own place before God, adding to the holiness of the picture that we have. They in their perfection and their purity, they can look on Him. They have two wings which cover their eyes.

They have two wings which cover their feet, which the commentators aren't sure exactly what it means, but it seemed to suggest a degree of humility and a degree of respect and known culturally that people would cover their feet because the roads were dusty and they got dirty and so they would cover their feet as a mark of respect or would wash their feet, of course, as we know also.

[12 : 59] And then the two wings with which they were flying, as it were, in readiness to do His bidding, always around this throne ready to serve the living God.

It's like nothing we've ever seen. We can't imagine even the best CGI image, couldn't possibly do justice to this picture that Isaiah sees here of the living God and of the Seraph worshipping Him.

So He's separate. He's distanced. He's holy and bright. I guess we get a touch of that in the transfiguration of Jesus when He's so bright that the disciples can't look on Him.

But despite His separation, He's also close. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.

So the whole earth, and we're living on the earth, we're part of the earth here today. The whole earth is full of His glory. Well, what does that mean? You know, in what ways the earth filled with the glory of God this evening?

[14 : 02] Can you see it? Are you aware of God when you're walking in the hills or walking down the royal mile, or as you sit in here this evening? Well, you know, we should be because glory simply means weightiness.

It means a sense of worth and significance. And I think in this context, it can be applied to a sense of His, or the weightiness leading to His imprint.

You know, if there's something heavy, it makes its own imprint on whatever it rests on. And there's this sense in which all around us is His weightiness, is His imprint in this, in the whole earth.

The incredible reality of the people sitting beside you, of even yourself when you look in the mirror, your being, your consciousness, your creativity, your laughter, your tears, the amazing way in which you reflect the character or the reality of the living God, this solar system, the mountains, the beauty of the never seen flower, the marvel of what is revealed by those amazing guys that go underwater and with their cameras and reveal parts of the creation that have never before been seen.

The architecture, the music, the love, the breath of life, the gentlest act, family, all of it reveal the glory of God. All of it is His imprint.

[15 : 38] All of it reflects who He is and reveals His glory. I know it's veiled. I know people don't recognize that. It's reflective glory and in many ways for us, it's manageable glory because we can study it and we can evidence it and we can touch it and feel it.

But nonetheless, it's His glory, different from the holiness that is unseen and remarkable.

And then we have Isaiah as he witnesses this, as he witnesses God. Oh, wouldn't we love to see God? Wouldn't it be great to see God?

I'm not sure if Isaiah would say that because when Isaiah sees God and sees, as it were, His glory uncovered and sees this remarkable vision of the living God, he doesn't slap his thigh and he doesn't clap and say, yee, there's the living God.

Wow, he's amazing. It's great to see him, love him. It's not like that at all. He's utterly and completely terrified when he sees the living God.

[16 : 54] He says, woe is me for I'm lost and I am unclean and I come from a people of unclean lips. He's declaring as he is in the company of the living God, his own uncleanness.

And the word that we have there for lostness, its root seems to be silence.

I'm silenced. I'm absolutely silenced before this God. I have nothing I can say in His presence, nothing I can justify myself with in His presence because of who He is.

And it's utterly memorable for Him. You know, I'm sure many of you will remember what happened, where you were when Queen Elizabeth died. And you will remember that year, last year, and many things in it will be memorable for you.

Well, so too, Isaiah remembered the year King Uzziah died. He'd been king for a long time. And he, for the most part, been a really good king. It was a really prosperous season for Israel and Judah.

[18 : 03] But laterally, he turned away from the living God. And he died. And when he died, maybe they all wondered, well, what's going to happen now?

What is going to be the fate of our nation? And as he remembers that, he also remembers what God showed him. The king died.

But he was shown the King of kings. He was shown the King, the Lord of hosts. And it was utterly memorable for him.

And as he does so, and as he sees this King, and as he sees the living God, he shares the guilt of His people who are under God's judgment.

Woe is me, I am lost. I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the people of unclean lips. He associates with them. He's a great prophet who has come to bring God's message, but he doesn't stand aloof and apart.

[19 : 01] And he says, well, I'm glad I'm clean, but the people of man, they are such a state. He associates with them because he sees himself in the same condition as they are before the holy God.

All utterly silenced before the throne. And Isaiah is the best in the land, probably. He's probably one of the holiest guys there.

And yet, even in his speech, which obviously as we read Isaiah, we recognize him as a great wordsmith, yet it's his speech that he finds himself to be so unclean with as is the speech of his people, incomparable to the living God, lost in light that is unbearable to look at, purity, holiness, and awesomeness.

And he senses and associates with the guilt of his people. Now, there's just one thing by way of application I want to say just for a second here is that the danger of comparative holiness, comparing ourselves with other people.

Isaiah could easily have said, well, I'm certainly not right and as good as God, but I'm a lot better than that lot. And I'll be bringing judgment, a message of judgment on them.

[20 : 18] And comparatively, I'm at least much more holy than them, that is so deadly, isn't it? And we're called against that kind of thinking with what Isaiah sees here.

And if we truly understand ourselves before God, we will never say that. We will never say, well, at least I'm better than that bloke or that girl there, because we will see the cleanness of God and the filth of our own hearts and the marvel of forgiveness and grace to us.

So we'll never be comparative. It's such an insidious, miserable, wretched way of thinking in a church. Better than them, better than them, maybe not as good as them.

Because we're called to recognize our condition before the living God and rely on His grace all of us, and we stand equal before Him.

So there's this shared guilt that He feels that makes Him no different. But if God comes close in creation and the glory of creation, He comes closer still in this story.

[21 : 27] In verses 6 and 7, the Seraphim on God's behalf fly at God's bidding to Isaiah with a burning coal taken from tongues from the altar, he touched my mouth, said, Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for.

So we have a vision of Isaiah and the holy of holies where on the day of atonement, sacrifice would be made once a year on behalf of the people and indeed on behalf of the priest also, where a substitute would take the sins of the people and the guilt would be laid on the substitute animal and the substitute animal would be sacrificed and the goat would also be thrown out into the desert, out into the wilderness.

And this great religious act, the Old Testament people knew, was always pointing forward to their need for a substitute for someone to come and touch their lips with forgiveness and cleansing and a message of forgiveness.

And it was this recognition that that is pointing forward to the great Messiah of the people who would be their redeemer and would be their Savior.

You know, Hebrews 4 in the New Testament speaks of the blood of bulls and of goats, never being able to take away sin but pointing forward to someone greater, some great substitute.

[23 : 02] Now in the last verse of this chapter it speaks about the holy seed being the stump. Now we simply don't have time to go into this but the holy seed is pointing forward to the Jesus who would come close, even closer than the glory of creation.

This Lord of hosts, this thrice holy living God who is revealed in vision here becomes a lamb, becomes a lamb, not on a throne but on the altar.

The separate one, the light of the world. The most amazing verse from me in the Bible is in many ways, 2 Corinthians 5, 21, he who knew no sin becomes sin so that in him we might be the righteousness of God.

That great substitutionary verse, the burning touch on Isaiah's lip, a reminder of the cost, the judgment, the searing judgment of God that God's substitute, Jesus Christ would ultimately pay on our behalf.

For he himself, as he went to the cross and on the cross, was silent, just as Isaiah was.

[24 : 31] Silent before, as Isaiah then prophesies in Isaiah 53, before his accusers, because he was guilty, yes, bearing our sin but because he was willing and he would not justify himself because he was going there as our Savior and as our Lord to receive the burning judgment of his Father, to take upon himself our guilt, the silence as the wrath and guilt was poured on him, our guilt so that we might sing his praises.

And the seraphs are bringing God's mercy and God's grace into Isaiah's situation and the words that he needed to hear, your sins are forgiven.

You're made clean. You're made clean by this atoning work that is seen in the substitutionary lamb but it's pointing forward to the amazing work of Jesus on the cross.

And we see that Jesus himself speaks of that in the passage we read in Matthew where he says that Isaiah could see that day.

He quotes this very chapter and recognizes that Isaiah, whatever Isaiah understood by that, he could see that the forgiveness he was given, the touch that he received, the closeness of God coming in this way was pointing forward to some great significant salvation for his people.

[26 : 04] It's a remarkable chapter. Now I just want to finish with four very quick observations. I'm sorry I haven't gone into this as we should and there's much that's been missed out and you're probably thinking he's missing out the hardest part and you might not be that wrong.

But I will mention it because it's important. There's a thousand lifetimes of truth in this chapter alone. If we could grasp this chapter and the truth of the God who's revealed and the mercy that is spoken of and pointing towards which will be made even clearer next Sunday evening when Sebastian preaches from chapter 9 which speaks about the coming of the Messiah.

There's just so much here but a few things just very briefly as we closed. Isaiah rebellion before God is much deeper and much more serious than we have ever contemplated.

And this passage, this chapter reminds us of the seriousness of falling short of God's glory and of being sinners which we all are, which Isaiah himself recognized as he stood alongside his people in guilt.

It's easy to treat Jesus today with all the distance from a passage like this as our cheap get out of jail free card to allow us to carry on building our lives our own way as if we can say sin's not really that bad.

[27 : 41] It's not that significant until we see the holy, holy, holy one nailed to a cross on our behalf naming you and naming me in his place and only the Holy Spirit can show us that.

If ever there was a plea to pray, it's in that truth. Only the Spirit of God can show us the cost and take away the complacency that so often we treat Him with.

Only prayer. The second thing connected that is the danger of despising God's mercy because that's exactly what this Old Testament people were doing.

And God was bringing a message of judgment on them for doing that, particularly in these difficult verses in verses 9 and 10. Keep on hearing but do not understand, keep on seeing but do not perceive.

Make the eyes of this people dull, their ears heavy, their blind, their eyes less they see, less they hear, less they understand and be healed, which is what Jesus quotes, of those in His own day who continued to reject the message of the prophets and finally the message of the Son who surely, the Son of the vineyard owner, surely they would respect and bring fruit on behalf of.

[29 : 07] But we remember that was not the case. And we have here God's solemn declaration of judgment upon His Old Testament people calling Isaiah to proclaim that.

Remember they were already rejecting God, already ignoring Him, already not living by faith, already worshiping idols, already living in fear of those nations around them rather than in fear of God.

And as Isaiah goes on to speak, it's not that he speaks in riddles, it's not that he makes things impossible for them to understand. He spoke very clearly and very simply. He was a beautiful speaker and he brought God's message was very clear.

But despite the clarity of the message, they kept on rejecting. And as they rejected, God's judgment further brought punishment and condemnation on them.

It was this dual spiral downwards, both their own rejection and God's judgment on them for rejecting which meant that though they were able to hear less and able to see less because of God's judgment, but the reality was they were choosing also not to see and not to hear.

[30 : 28] And we need to recognize and remember how helpless we are and how prone we are to despise, to resist, to quench the spirit of God in our lives, even as Christians.

And to take for granted that God had to move from the throne to the cross in order to redeem us. And so the call is for us not to turn our backs on God as believers because that's a dangerous thing to do.

But if you're not a Christian, particularly solemn and significant, not to keep on rejecting the one who offers eternal life and offers himself in love and in grace, because there does come a day when there is no turning back from that.

And it's an awesome and frightening reality. We need the power of prayer. If I think I can live a day as a Christian, and if you think you can live a day as a Christian without prayer, and the Holy Spirit to enable us to walk and talk and share and live for Jesus, then we misunderstand what the gospel says.

But even in this, I think there's a message of mercy towards them. I'm not sure if other commentators would agree with that. But there's a call in what Jesus, what Isaiah is saying here, God is saying through Isaiah, is a message of judgment for sure.

[32 : 02] But surely also it's a call to repent, to cry out, to confess and to return. And of course if they didn't do that, then the judgment would be unfolded in their lives, which of course it was revealed to be the case.

The prophet is known to be genuine when the prophecy that he makes about Assyria and about Babylon as the oppressing nations who bring God's people into slavery and judgment for seventy years comes true, which it did.

And yet a stump remained. And from that stump, from those believing few, the Redeemer came and Jesus came.

Habakkuk 3, our prayer, should always be in wrath, Lord God, remember mercy for all of us, for this nation of which we're apart. And recognition that it's sovereign purpose is never thwarted.

That's part of what this passage reminds us, that God, what God said would happen, happened. And from that stump came the Savior, the Redeemer.

[33 : 18] And indeed, more remarkably, even in their rejection of Him, we find that that rejection becomes the way of the cross and the way of redemption.

So He uses their rejection as the means to redeem His people because it is through the cross, through His death and resurrection. Though they thought they were quenching the sun, they thought they were getting rid of God, they were defeating Him.

It's through that amazing rejection that the salvation of God is most gloriously revealed. Lastly, and again, I'm sorry we haven't really spent any time on this, but when we're forgiven as believers, we're called by God to serve Him.

I heard in the midst of the Lord saying, whom shall I send to Isaiah? Who will go for us? Then I said, here am I, send me. Unequivocal that He has this commission and He has this willingness to serve and follow the living God.

Now, we're not all called to be Isaiah's, thankfully, but we're all called to serve Him unconditionally, we're all called to be known as Christ's and to obey Christ.

[34 : 39] However counter-cultural that happens to be, we might not be asked to bring a message like this specifically, but we will be asked to live and to share a truth that is diametrically opposed to the way this world and our neighbors and our friends are going, and to shine as light in the darkness for Jesus Christ.

He empowers us, He commissions us, He partners with us, He wants to use us for His glory and to serve Him. And may that be what we are enabled to do by grace, responding to His call, because we've seen who He is, and we recognize the worthiness of the living God to serve and to follow.

Let's pray. Father God help us to know You better, to... even can I ask that everyone here this evening just will have a little bit of a deeper and more clear understanding of who You are through Your Word, which does seem impossibly different.

We understand Jesus because we can see Him, but we find it difficult to comprehend this remarkable invisible spirit who is thrice holy, whose angelic hosts serve Him perfectly, who is sovereign over everything in this universe, even the things that seem dark and difficult, and who will one day reveal Himself in a way that the whole earth will know and recognize, and will either call on the rocks to follow them, or they will be those who have been broken themselves as they have fallen for salvation onto the rock in whom they can trust.

So Heavenly Father, help us to by faith see this invisible world a bit more clearly, and with Your strength and with Your power, obey Your call to serve You with grace, humility, with respect, with honesty, with courage, with joy, with thanksgiving, and forgive us when we don't do that.

[37:11] Amen. Thank you.