

Our God Saves: Turn

Holy, Holy, Holy

Isaiah 6

Mark Vroegop

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. Above 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. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And 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!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." And 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." And he said, "Go, and say to this people: '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." Then 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, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And 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 (Isa. 6).

Some books are so impactful that you can remember where you were sitting when you read them.

R. C. Sproul's book *The Holiness of God* is that kind of book for me. I would list it among the top five most influential books in my life. It's powerful. It's convicting. And it was timely for me as a junior in college.

I remember reading it on a couch in a university study lounge. The book was given to me by a professor because I was in a crisis. Sarah and I had just broken up after a few years of dating. Candidly, our relationship had become so internally focused that it became idolatrous. By that I mean our problem was that we needed each other more than we needed God, and our relationship deteriorated. You see, when you live your life entirely in light of what other people think of you (even a girlfriend), you'll end up hating them.

Sitting alone in the dorm with a broken heart, I read *The Holiness of God*. And I was stunned with the glory of God and how idolatrous my heart had become. Sproul wrote about a defining moment in his life. In the wee hours of the morning, the Lord met him:

I was in a posture of prayer, but I had nothing to say. I knelt there quietly, allowing the sense of the presence of a holy God to fill me. . . An icy chill started at the base of my spine and crept up my neck. Fear swept over me. I fought the impulse to run from the foreboding presence that gripped me. The terror passed, but it was soon followed by another wave...It was the flooding of my soul with unspeakable peace, a peace that brought instant rest and repose to my troubled spirit...I wanted to linger there. To say nothing. To do nothing. Simply to bask in the presence of God. That moment was life-transforming. Something deep in my spirit was being settled once and for all. From this moment there could be no turning back. . . I was alone with God. A holy God.¹

The vision of God's glory in Isaiah 6 changed me. And it eventually changed my outlook on nearly everything. Over several months, God restored my relationship with Sarah—he actually gave us a new relationship centered on satisfaction with God. Getting the holiness of God and his glory in the right place was life-changing.

Beholding created a becoming. A vision of God's glory and receiving his grace led to a new sense of freedom and living on mission. Isaiah 6 was a watershed moment. Simply stated it looked like this:

Glory + Grace -> Go

We are going to see this equation in the life of Isaiah. The sixth chapter gives us a clear picture of the calling upon Isaiah's life and what fueled his prophetic ministry. Let's look at this text and see what we might learn. Perhaps this sermon and this moment could be a defining moment for your life.

Glory

Our text begins with a context. Isaiah describes an encounter with God, and he sets it up with "in the year that King Uzziah died" (v. 1). This is more than just a date. It's a historical marker for a time period, similar to what you would feel if you read "at the height of COVID-19."

Uzziah was a good king, and he reigned for fifty-two years. Consider how long that is. I know you can do the math but what would it be like if we had the same president since 1969. That kind of reign would create an era in any nation's history. Such was the rule of Uzziah.

His time on the throne was marked by prosperity, security, advancements, and spiritual vitality (see 2 Chron. 26). But Uzziah made a terrible decision in his final years. Second Chronicles 26:16-21 tells us that "when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the Lord and entered the temple to burn incense." For some reason, Uzziah overstepped his authority. In what must have been a dramatic showdown, the chief priest, along with eighty other priests, confronted him. When

¹ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), 13-14.

Uzziah refused to listen and grew angry, God struck him with leprosy. He was forced to live out the remainder of his days in quarantine. He never went back to the temple (2 Chron. 26:21).

Beyond the tragic ending of a good king, Uzziah's death in 739 also marked the beginning of the rising threat from Assyria. In 740 BC, Tiglath-Pileser III began a military campaign and conquered the nations between Israel and Assyria. So, this is a time when there are looming threats.

Remember, Isaiah is likely an insider. He may be part of the extended royal family. He's probably aware of the precarious situation that the nation faces. Isaiah may have gone to the temple in crisis. But when he arrives, he sees a life-changing vision of God's glory.

Isaiah is given an opportunity to see some element of God's glory. He describes it as seeing "the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up" (v. 1). This image communicates God's exalted and sovereign rule. Isaiah encounters the majesty of God. It's as if the curtain of his earthly existence is pulled back, and he's given an opportunity to see what is really happening.

When he says that "the train of his robe filled the temple" (v. 1), the idea is that the majesty and glory of God are touching the earth.² In the same way that the train of a bride's garment is a derivative of her radiance, so too God's glory emanates from this throne and into Isaiah's world. Isaiah is ushered into the presence of God.

Above the throne are the seraphim. These angelic creatures are the guardians of God's glory. Their name literally means "burning ones," and with wings covering the face and feet, they look like flames of fire as they fly with two other wings.³ The seraphim speak in antiphonal praise, calling to one another. They sing one song—back and forth—about one thing: God's holiness.

The word "holy" means brightness, unapproachableness, or separateness of God. "Holy" makes God different than human beings. "Holy" is the unique moral majesty of God.⁴ It's important to note that the holiness of God is the reason why this vision is beautiful and stunning. The holiness of God is the perfection, sinlessness, and purity of who God is. "Holy" is what makes God other, distant, and dangerous.

"Holy" is the defining characteristic of God. That's why the seraphim say, "Holy, holy, holy" (v. 3). This threefold repetition is designed to elevate the importance of this description. According to R. C. Sproul, this is the only character quality of God repeated like this. God is never called love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy or justice, justice, justice.⁵ Only "holy" receives this level of emphasis. And for good reason.

² J. Alec Motyer, [*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 80.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 40.

Notice, however, that it's not just the nature of holiness that is stunning, but also its scope: "the whole earth is full of his glory" (v. 3). Everything in the created world is designed to reflect the glory of God's holiness. This is the purpose of the creation.

Isaiah is confronted here with the most important question any human being can ask: "what is God like?" He sees the glory of God as expressed in what it means for God to be holy. The concept of holy glory is the center of everything. It's the why behind the what. Holy glory is why God created the world. Holy glory is why sin is so bad. Holy glory is why Jesus came and died. Holy glory is why the disciples were stunned as they watched Jesus. Holy glory is what motivates obedience. And holy glory will be the experience of those who enter into the new heavens and the new earth.

This vision will become the basis of Isaiah's ministry because of what he saw: holy glory.

For some Christians, the most pressing need in their lives right now is a renewed vision of God's holy glory. Maybe you find yourself spiritually dull, weary, disillusioned, and downcast. Time for rest will help some. Talking to a friend or counselor would be beneficial. But I would suggest that, for some, we need to be reminded of the big God behind our big problems. He's holy, holy, holy!

If you are not yet a Christian, this may help you. The problem with human beings is that we pursue glory in the wrong places. We keep exchanging the glory of God for our own glory as expressed in so many things like what people think of us, what money can buy us, what pleasure will please us, or what autonomy will give us. But it doesn't work. There is nothing else and no one else who is holy, holy, holy. There's nothing else that has this kind of glory.

And when you understand this, it changes everything.

Grace

We see what happens next and how it relates to God's grace. The holy glory of God is full of power. We find that in Isaiah's experience, the foundation of the thresholds shakes (v. 4); the entrance to the temple is disturbed. Additionally, the temple fills with smoke (v. 4), which is commonly connected to God's presence in the Old Testament. But it also has the effect of preventing Isaiah from seeing.

Everything about this scene is designed to create a sense of awe—even good fear. Isaiah is witnessing something otherworldly and mind-blowing. But it's also heartbreaking.

Isaiah understands what he is seeing, and he feels the dissonance between the holy glory and his sinfulness. He is fearful and broken. The vision of God's glory is frightening to a man who knows how different he is than God. Verse 5 records his dismay, "Woe is me! For I am lost." Isaiah expresses emotional despair regarding the fearful condition of who he is in light of who God is.

Isaiah is lost which can also be translated as ruined or silenced. There's nothing he can say. He's either not qualified to speak, there's no defense, or the glory is so overwhelming that he's aware of his unworthiness. He's a man of unclean lips (v. 5). His words reflect his heart and who he is.

But that's not all. Isaiah is also aware that his problem is everyone's problem. Not only is he a man of unclean lips, but everyone he knows has unclean lips. He's in trouble. The whole nation is in trouble because of what Isaiah sees. If Isaiah would compare himself to others, he might have felt better. But because he has seen "the King, the Lord of hosts" (v. 5), he's broken beyond measure. This is what a right view of God does! It breaks us over ourselves so that we can rightly testify about the brokenness around us.

Something glorious happens next. After Isaiah's plea, a seraph removes coal from the altar. Don't miss that. The angel removes something connected to the place where atonement was made. From the altar of sacrifice, the angel takes burning coal, and he touches Isaiah's mouth with it. The angel connects Isaiah's confession with the location of where the coal is placed.

Then the angel announces the grace of God: "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (v. 7). Notice that this entire act of cleansing is something that God does. Isaiah didn't earn it. Isaiah didn't do it. No sacrifice. No promise of future change. The angel comes to him in an act of unmerited, divine favor.

R. C. Sproul writes:

In this divine act of cleansing, Isaiah experienced a forgiveness that went beyond the purification of his lips. He was cleansed throughout, forgiven to the core, but not without the awful pain of repentance. . . He was in mourning for his sin, overcome with moral grief, and God sent an angel to heal him. . . In a moment, the disintegrated prophet was whole again. His mouth was purged. He was clean.⁶

That is what the grace of God is all about. And it still happens. Last week in our baptism service, Rachael Height told us that it was during a particular sermon at the church when she learned what it meant to have a personal relationship with Jesus. She understood who God is. She embraced her condition as a sinner. And God brought forgiveness to her through Jesus. That's grace.

My prayer today is that many people would join Rachel in receiving the grace of God by faith in Jesus. If you see the glory of God, put your faith and trust in him today—right now.

God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who are sick of themselves and turn to Jesus. That's what grace is. It's amazing.

Glory + Grace -> Go

The rest of the chapter is about Isaiah's mission. When a vision of God's glory is combined with the receiving of God's grace, there is compelling movement. Consider Jesus's final words to his disciples: "Go. . . and make disciples of all nation" (Matt. 28:19).

⁶ Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 47.

But in Isaiah, it starts with a question that emanates from the throne: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (v. 8). Notice Isaiah’s enthusiasm. The vision of God and the experience of grace compel him to participate in God’s plan. When glory and grace combine, you can’t help yourself. Isaiah immediately volunteers, “Here I am! Send me” (v. 8). He knew nothing of the mission, the outcome, or the challenges. All that he knew was “my eyes have seen the King” (v. 5) and his sin was purged.

Then we hear the somber and painful ministry to which Isaiah will be called:

And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘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” (Isa. 6:9–10).

Isaiah’s ministry was not marked by widespread humility, conviction, and change. No, the audience of this book will be characterized as having dull hearts, heavy ears, and blind eyes. Isaiah is going to be an instrument of divine judgment through his prophetic ministry. The people of God will eventually change, but Isaiah’s role will not be one where he’ll see it happen.

Understanding the nature of the calling, Isaiah laments, “How long, O Lord?” (v. 11). He’s not questioning God’s decision; he’s wrestling with the weight. And God replies:

“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And 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 (Isa. 6:11–13).

The people of God are about to experience divine discipline. For that to happen, God needs a worldly nation (like Assyria or Babylon), but he also needs a prophet. He needs Isaiah to be his spokesman of warning. God is calling Isaiah to be the one who delivers a message to a people who will not listen to him during their lifetime.

The rest of the book of Isaiah charts the course and records the words that he says in the fulfillment of this mission. Sadly, the nation refuses to listen. Divine discipline comes. Isaiah never sees the day when the people of God turn. But his mission isn’t primarily about seeing the desired result.

Isaiah’s mission isn’t fueled by the results he desperately longs for; it is inspired by the vision of glory and grace that grip him. You see, sometimes glory + grace -> going to hard places.

When you know what God is like and when you have been touched by his grace, you have deeply grounded hope.

In reflecting on the life of Carl F. H. Henry, a leader in evangelicalism in the 1950s, Matthew Hall wrote this in 2015:

Better than most, Carl Henry understood that even in the darkest of times, the {gospel} tells us that hope is our “original factory setting.” We labor for truth, advocate for justice, and suffer persecution for righteousness, but we do it all with a hopefulness that only makes sense because of the promises secured by a resurrected Christ who is ruling over the cosmos right now.

He quoted Henry:

“Evangelicalism can view the future with a sober optimism, grounded not only in the assurance of the ultimate triumph of righteousness, but also in the conviction that divine redemption can be a potent factor in any age.”⁷

Is hope your “original factory setting” in light of your vision of God’s glory and his grace? Are you marked by “sober optimism” in the midst of challenges and hardships? What idols do you see the Lord surfacing and toppling in your life? What mission—hard mission—has he called you to?

What is your role in this equation? Glory + Grace -> Go.

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⁷ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/3-things-ive-learned-from-carl-f-h-henry/>