

The Holiness of God¹

I'd like to introduce my topic this evening by passing on to you a comment made to us at the Theological College by Dr Faber. As he began his lectures on the doctrine of God, he told us students that it is so very easy, when we speak about the Lord God, to take God's name in vain. It's so very much a marvel, he insisted, that the infinite Creator of all has condescended to tell people about Himself. Then he added: it's a greater marvel yet that this holy God permits sinners to take His wonderfully holy name upon their lips. For sinners so easily abuse that name, do discredit to it.

This evening we are to speak of God. Let us be aware, then, that we stand on holy ground. May the Lord our God, for Jesus' sake, keep us from sin in thought, word and deed, as we busy ourselves with His revelation about His holiness as it comes to us in Isaiah 6.

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Background to Isaiah 6 (vs 1a; II Chron 26)

The vision recorded in Isaiah 6 is dated as having occurred "in the year that King Uzziah died." This King Uzziah, Scriptures tell us in II Kings 15:3, "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (II Kings 15:3). Indeed, the Lord blessed his kingship with long life – he reigned for 52 years– blessed it too with prosperity for his country (cf II Chron 26:6ff); his reign was for Judah a time of political stability and economic success.

There was one thing, though, that darkened his reign. The Lord had specifically instructed the people of Israel that only descendants of Levi were permitted to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense to God (Num 3:10). Despite that command, though, Uzziah the king, from the tribe of Judah, entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense himself before the Lord. You know what happened: Azariah the priest pursued Uzziah into the temple, together with 80 courageous priests of the Lord, and they "withstood" the king and told him in no uncertain terms that his conduct was contrary to the command of the Lord. "Get out of the sanctuary," they said to the king, "for you have been unfaithful!" Uzziah, though, did not heed this reminder that he was transgressing the command of the Lord. Instead, he "became angry". While his anger burned within him (and to that degree he hardened himself in his sin), "leprosy broke out on his forehead." This leprosy was God's punishment on the king's sin. Leprosy, we are recall, was not simply a disease like any other; leprosy was a symbol of death, a leper was a living corpse. "The wages of sin is death," and that is what Uzziah received on the spot on account of his sin: death in his body.

It was when he realised that "the Lord had afflicted him" that Uzziah hastened to obey the command of God, and he hurried to leave the temple. But since he was now a leper, there was no longer room for him to come at all into the temple complex. In fact, Scripture tells us that "he lived in a separate house – leprous, and excluded from the temple of the Lord" (II Chron 26:21). This was in agreement with God's command as He had given it in Lev 13. For our part, we should know that this penalty was no small thing; according to the significance given in Scripture to the temple, Uzziah was cut off from the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it came through the sacrifices in the temple.

Now, we're not to think that the king had no regard for the Lord. Recall: Scriptures expressly say that "he did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (II Chron 26:4). But his action in the temple was obviously sin. Why did the king decide on his course of action, despite what the Lord had commanded? That can only be because he did not regard

¹This paper was originally prepared for the Women's League Day, held in Byford, Nov 29, 1995. The text as delivered on that occasion has appeared in "*Together we Serve*". I have altered the text somewhat for an address in Launceston, 13 August, 1999.

adequately *who God was*. That is: before Uzziah entered the temple he was not *impressed with the holiness of God*, and so thought to worship God *as he saw fit*. But God's response was too clear for misinterpretation: He is *God*, and insists that people take Him seriously, and therefore obey His Word humbly.

It takes but little imagination to appreciate that the people of Israel in the days of Uzziah will have been quite touched by what happened to their king. They will certainly have known that it was God who struck him, and they will have known too why God struck him. So it is that the people were reminded that the God of Israel was very much bothered by sin, yes, they were reminded that their God by covenant was holy, and tolerated no sin – not even sin in the context of well-intentioned worship of Him.

But see, the people in the years after Uzziah was struck with leprosy demonstrated that they had learned but little about the holiness of God. Isaiah's first 5 chapters² make clear that God's people by covenant in general acted with the same easy approach as did the king; they, like the king, thought to serve God (of course!), but chose to do so in their own self-styled fashion. Chap 1, for example, tells us that the people of Israel brought countless sacrifices to the temple, all in proper service of God. But the Lord had no appreciation for these sacrifices because they had no qualms about milking the poor, the fatherless and the widow. That's to say: while they said with the sacrifices that they loved God, their actions betrayed that they did not love their neighbours as themselves (cf Is 1:12ff; 3:15).

King Uzziah lived as a leper for some twelve years,³ and then he died. At his death, the significance of the king's leprosy was again impressed on the people, for they did not bury Uzziah in the normal burial place for kings; instead they buried him in a field because, said the people, "he is a leper" (II Chron 26:23). That death, then, focused on the minds of the people again just how holy the Lord was: even in death Uzziah had to suffer the penalty of his attempt to serve God in his own self-chosen way.

Well now, "in the year that King Uzziah did," Isaiah "saw" the vision recorded in chap 6 of his prophecies. The point of the timing is this: what had been communicated to Israel by *deed* in the temple twelve years ago when Uzziah was struck with leprosy (and Israel was reminded of that instruction at his death) was now communicated to Israel by *word* through the vision God caused Isaiah to see and to record. Israel had not taken on board the instruction God gave in the king's leprosy, and so God *underlined* that message again for the benefit of His covenant people.

God in Majesty (vss 1-4)

As to what it was that Isaiah saw, we read that he "saw the Lord seated on a throne." The word "Lord" is printed here with one capital letter and three lower case letters, and so is not a reference to God's name, Yahweh; this is rather a reference to God's office, God's title. The term 'Lord' describes God as the Sovereign One, the Master over all, the King of kings. This is God in His God-ness, in His office as Ruler over all. In the words of John Calvin: Isaiah saw "the inconceivable majesty of God."⁴ Elsewhere Calvin says: "God appeared to [Isaiah] full of majesty and glory."⁵

The sovereignty of this Lord is pointed up further by the fact that He's sitting on a "throne" – that seat of authority. The grandeur of that throne is reflected by the words "high and exalted". The throne of this Lord is not just any throne, but one like none other, one lifted up above any other throne. Again, the sovereignty of this Lord is stressed by the

²I take the premise that the first five chapters, though not necessarily antedating the vision of chapter 6, nevertheless show us something of what was going on amongst the people of Judah in the (early) days of the prophet's (lengthy) ministry.

³Young, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), Vol 1, pg 235.

⁴John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, transl. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pg 200. Further quotes from Calvin are taken from predictable places in this commentary, unless stated otherwise.

⁵Ibid, pg 202.

reference to the train of His robe; such was its length that it “filled the temple,” filled the palace of this king.⁶ We understand that the length and extent of the train of His robe is descriptive of the grandeur and majesty of the Lord. Says Calvin: Isaiah “intends to ascribe to God a venerable aspect, and far beyond any human form.”

Once more, in keeping with His sovereignty, this Lord has servants positioned around His throne. The text speaks of seraphs. This is the only place in the Bible where mention is made of seraphs, but the reference is undoubtedly to angels. The term “seraph” comes from a word meaning “to burn”, and then its understood that these seraphs, these burning ones, are afire with zeal for God. In Calvin’s words: “this description holds out to us, as in sun-beams, the brightness of God’s infinite majesty, that we may learn by it to behold and adore his wonderful and overwhelming glory.”

The position of the seraphs around the throne describes them as attendants, servants ready to do their Master’s bidding. So it is that they use two of their six wings for flying; in a flash they carry out the instructions received. With two others of their six wings, however, they cover their faces in the presence of this glory of their Lord. To be sure, they’re sinless creatures, and so it’s not on account of sin that they hide their faces from this God. Yet they are but creatures, once created from nothing, and in the face of God the Creator the contrast between themselves and the Lord they serve is of such magnitude that, “as a sign of reverence and awe before the holy Lord”,⁷ they cover their faces in His presence. Again I quote Calvin:

“The two wings with which they cover their face show plainly enough that even angels cannot endure God’s brightness, and that they are dazzled by it in the same manner as when we attempt to gaze upon the radiance of the sun. And if angels are overwhelmed by the majesty of God, how great will be the rashness of men if they venture to intrude so far!”

With the final two wings they covered their feet, says the text, and this was “perhaps done as an expression of humility and unworthiness.”⁸ Here, then, the contrast is complete. God is so great, so majestic, and so awe-inspiring, that in the presence of this God the seraphs know themselves to be *nothing*. This vision in the temple “is clearly intended to place in the strongest possible contrast the absolute divinity of Jehovah and the relativity and dependence of created existence.”⁹ Here is depicted “the antithesis between God and not-God.” In the presence of this God as Isaiah sees it, “everything is expressive of His holiness, pervaded by the atmosphere of the divine: here everything created covers and humbles and effaces itself.”

This sense of the holy is heightened by the ceaseless¹⁰ cry the seraphim. Their faces are covered, but their mouths are open: “Holy, holy, holy,” they call out one to the other; “Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts!” Three times we read the same word “holy”, and the point of the repetition is not that the seraphs shout the word three times; the point is rather that the Hebrew language expresses the notion of the superlative through repetition.¹¹ The fact that in Isaiah the word “holy” is repeated three times makes this the superlative of the superlatives; here the Lord is described as *most* holy, the holiest of the holy ones.¹² Such is His holiness that the seraphs keep reminding each other of it, keep calling the word to each

⁶The word ⲓⲛⲧⲉⲙⲗⲟⲩ means both palace and temple.

⁷Young, pg 240.

⁸Young, 241.

⁹G Vos, “Some Doctrinal Features of the Early Prophecies of Isaiah”, in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pg 274. The following two quotes come from the same source, same page.

¹⁰Young, pg 241. The form of the verb combined with the structure of the sentence gives this verb a “frequentative force, ‘and each kept crying.’”

¹¹See the use of the word ‘pit’ in Gen 14:10; the repetition of the word is meant to convey that the pit was big/deep, see Gesenius/Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*, 123e.

¹²See also Ps 93, molded too on the three-fold statement that God is holy.

other, and all the while they keep their faces covered lest they see this Lord of holiness and expose their faces to His holy gaze.

Their song contains more though: “the whole earth,” they cry, “is full of His glory.” Not only the temple is full of His splendour (recall that the train of His robe fills the temple), but the whole earth, all creation, manifests His glory. In the words of Ps 19: “the heavens declare the glory of God” (vs 1). Such is the holiness of this Lord that all the earth exudes it, reflects it.¹³ The entire world is one glorious display of God’s perfection and His attributes, and so all men can know of God’s awesome holiness and righteousness and justice and almighty power; none is without excuse. “Wherever we turn our eyes, we see the marks of His majesty, and should lift our hearts in praise to Him who is holy.”¹⁴

In fact, the delightful extent of that glory is reflected further by the words of vs 4: “at the sound of their voices the door-posts [of the temple] and thresholds shook.” One seraph called to another of the holiness of this God of glory, and that very dead piece of timber that formed the doorpost quaked in its moorings. In the face of the majesty of this great God, creation itself cannot be silent! What Isaiah sees is “a scene of incomparable majesty.”¹⁵ Here is reflected that same excitement in the face of God’s greatness as Ps 29 echoes:

“The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
The Lord shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth,
And stripes the forests bare;
And in His temple everyone says, ‘Glory!’” (vss 8f).

Calvin draws out the lesson: if, on account of the majesty and holiness of God, inanimate and dumb creatures are moved whenever He speaks, how much more ought we who can think and feel and smell be moved when a God of such greatness utters His voice!¹⁶

We’re further told that “the temple was filled with smoke.” And smoke, we are to know, is in the Bible often a symbol of God’s presence. Think of the smoke that enveloped Mt Sinai when God made His covenant with Israel in Exodus 20. Isaiah can have no doubt: God is present here! And so the reason for the angels’ conduct and song is driven home to the prophet in words too clear to be misunderstood: those angels know the God who is present in the temple, and their conduct reflects their profound awareness that the God they serve is majestic, holy, grand in His glory. Here is God, “the one supreme reality from whom everything else derives its significance.”¹⁷

As we contemplate the majesty and grandeur and holiness of this God, there is one more thing in these first four verses that needs our attention. I mentioned already that the word ‘Lord’ in vs 1 was written with one upper case letter and three lower case letters, and so denotes God’s majesty, God’s sovereignty over all. But in vs 3 the angels speak of God as “the LORD”, and the term is written this time in four upper case letters. In upper case letters the term translates God’s covenant name Yahweh. That is: in upper case the term ‘LORD’ captures the bond God has sovereignly placed between Himself and this sinful nation. The term reminds the reader that God has claimed this people as His, that they are His special possession.

In the context of Isaiah 6, here is a most marvellous thought! The God in whose presence the angels cover their faces and their feet on account of His inexpressible holiness,

¹³Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), pg 280: “Closely connected with the conception of holiness is that of the divine Kabod or glory. The latter is the outward manifestation of the former. Glory is revealed holiness in the metaphysical as well as in the ethical acceptance of the term.”

¹⁴Young, pg 246.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶“...this noise confirms at this day the voice of God, that we may tremble whenever He speaks; for if inanimate and dumb creatures are moved, what ought we to do, who feel, smell, and understand, for no other purpose than that we may obey his word in a holy and reverent manner?”

¹⁷Vos, pg 275.

the God in whose presence these angels ceaselessly sing their praises, the God before whom creation trembles is the very God who claimed Israel to be His people! Israel's God is no small God, Israel's God is not worth only a bow or two and then one can speak as equals. Israel's God by covenant is surrounded by sinless angels who give to sinful children of God an example of how creatures do well to act in the presence of this God of infinite holiness.

Isaiah's Response 1 (vs 5)

No wonder, then, that the prophet responds as he does in the presence of this God. Look at vs 5: the man's not at all comfortable! In the presence of such a God he doesn't grab the opportunity to ask of God a couple of favours. Nor does he turn from this God to continue a life of pleasure and materialism (as the Israelites of his day were doing). No, all thoughts of what he might gain from the nearness of God are swept away in the face of his overwhelming *dread* in the presence of such a God: "woe to me," he says, "I am ruined!" "Woe," he says. That word "woe" is used repeatedly by the prophets to pronounce the curse of God upon some sinful nation or city or person. Take chap 3:11: "Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them!" Well, now that Isaiah is standing in the presence of God and sees His holiness, this is the word he uses with regards to himself: "woe", he says, "woe to me". He's not expressing the conviction that a terrible calamity is about to fall on him; rather, with that word he *calls* for a calamity to fall upon him, just as much as with his earlier cry of "woe to the wicked" he called for a calamity to fall upon the wicked. The point is this. In the face of the God Isaiah has seen, Isaiah wants only to perish, wants the mountains to fall on him and the hills to cover him – anything to get away from the presence of this covenant God! Woe to me, he says, let the horror of horrors happen!

He adds that he's "ruined". Literally, he says that he's coming apart at the seams, that he's falling to pieces, that he just can't last here in the presence of such a God. Here we're shown something of how powerfully Isaiah was affected by that vision. So terrified was he by seeing the holiness of God that he fully expected to perish, yes, he *wanted* to perish to escape this holy God. The very awareness of the infinite distance between the Lord's greatness and purity on the one hand, and his own littleness and sinfulness as a creature on the other, forced the prophet to have no thoughts at all any more of his own merits. As he himself adds: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."

Such is God's greatness and His grandeur and His majesty that the angels cover their faces and all the while they cry out to one another that God is so very, very holy. But Isaiah has his face uncovered, he sees this highly exalted Lord, and he can't join in with the cry of the angels because his lips are too unclean, too sinful. "I am a man of unclean lips," he says, so I can't sing with the angels, and "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts," and so I perish, I perish: mountains cover me, please! Woe to me, I'm undone! RC Sproul in his book entitled *The Holiness of God* has put it so well:

"For the first time in his life, Isaiah really understood who God was. At the same instant, for the first time, Isaiah really understood who Isaiah was."¹⁸

He saw God, so majestic, so holy, and suddenly he knew that he himself was nothing, *nothing*! "I am a man of unclean lips," he says of himself, "and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Sinful he was, he knew it, and therefore worthy only of damnation; let the hills cover me, the mountains bury me, woe to me, let a curse come upon me – anything to get away from this awesome God!! Again, in Calvin's words:

"...the presence of God and approach to him is the destruction of our flesh; because it shows that we are nothing in ourselves. When he who is conscious of his wretchedness sees *God*, what can he expect but destruction?" (Emphasis added, cb).

¹⁸RC Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), pg 45f.

Our Response

This sense of the holiness and majesty of God, this equal sense of the wretchedness of self was understood by the godly through the generations. Daniel in Babylon perceived the grandeur of God. So, he writes,

“I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed: ‘O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame ... because we have sinned against you’” (Dan 9:3ff).

This is equally the awe with which the author to the Hebrews spoke of God. So he instructed his readers to

“worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).

Again, this sense of God’s holiness and majesty characterises the book of Revelation. I quote from Rev 4:

“Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever” (Rev 4:8ff; cf 5:14).

Notice the parallels with Isaiah 6: the angels ceaselessly sing the song of “Holy, holy, holy,” and in response to this declaration of God’s holiness and grandeur the elders –finite, sinful men like Isaiah– fall down before this God and worship Him.

This sense of human unworthiness in the presence of such a God was understood too at the time of the great Reformation of the 16th century. Listen to a prayer adopted by the churches as a teaching tool to impress on the common folk how they ought to approach God:

“O eternal and merciful God and Father, we humble ourselves before Your great majesty, for we have frequently and grievously sinned against You. We acknowledge that if You should enter into judgment with us, we would deserve nothing but temporal and eternal death. We are deeply conscious of the fact that we are conceived and born in sin, and that all manner of evil desires against You and our neighbour fill our hearts. We continually transgress Your commandments, failing to do what You have commanded us, and doing that which You have expressly forbidden. We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way. We acknowledge our waywardness, and are heartily sorry for all our sins. We confess that our transgressions are innumerable, and that we have nothing with which to repay our debt. Therefore we are not worthy to be called Your children, nor to lift up our eyes to You in heaven.”¹⁹

Maybe you recognise that prayer. I have simply quoted it from the *Book of Praise*, pg 641. You see: our fathers of generations gone by beheld God in His holiness and grandeur, as described by passages as Isaiah 6, and so they *knew themselves*. They understood something of the greatness and incomparable majesty of holy God, and so did not so much as consider

¹⁹The opening paragraph of “A General Confession of Sins and Prayer before the Sermon and on Days of Fasting and Prayer”, *Book of Praise*, revised edition (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1984), pg 641. Further prayers in the *Book of Praise* reflect the same brokenness in the face of God’s majesty.

standing tall in His presence. Instead, our fathers were deeply conscious of their sins and of their evil, deeply conscious that in the presence of this God they could expect only the damnation King Uzziah received and the damnation the prophet Isaiah called upon himself. They understood who God was, and so they understood who they themselves were. Here, I submit, is something that 20th century believer would do so well to learn again. O to have the infinite holiness of our covenant God seared into hearts and consciences! This God is so absolutely different from anything creaturely, is “incomparably divine”²⁰! Any who would approach Him, who would call themselves by His name, who claim to be children of this God, need to keep that in mind.

But let us return to Isaiah 6.

Gospel for Isaiah (vss 6,7)

Even as God in Isaiah 6 demonstrated something of His incomparable grandeur and His splendid holiness, He also came with the gospel. Isaiah, you recall, was so overwhelmed by the holiness and majesty of God, was so aware of his own unworthiness and sinfulness, that he begged for destruction. But see: God does not oblige Isaiah’s words, does not send the requested curse! Instead “one of the seraphs” –of course upon command of the God who sat on that exalted throne– flew to the altar (remember: the vision has its setting in the temple), picked up the tongs lying there for use by the priests, plucked a red hot coal from the burning altar, and with it touched Isaiah’s lips. That coal, we are to understand, was hot on account of the sacrifice it was meant to burn, a sacrifice that in turn foreshadowed that Jesus Christ would be sacrificed on the altar of Calvary in order to atone for the sins of God’s people. With that coal, then, we are very much at the heart of the good news of God’s redemptive work in Christ Jesus. Here is embodied the doctrine of sins being atoned for by the death of Christ; yes, here is the doctrine of Another dying in place of the sinner. The sacrifice on the altar was burning because sins had been committed in Israel, and the wages of sin is death. The sinner was not killed, though; the animal was killed instead. This is the gospel: Christ would die *in place of* the other, and the result would be that the other would go free.

Isaiah sees God in His holiness, and so sees himself in his own horridness, and he calls out a curse upon himself. God, though, in infinite compassion, draws the prophet’s attention to the altar, to the sacrifice on it. Yes, God has that angel take a coal from the altar and apply it to the lips of this unclean man. We understand the point: Isaiah *the sinner*, the man of the unclean lips, *gets to benefit from the sacrifice!* His lips are touched with that coal, and so he cannot get around it: the gospel of that altar is applied to *him*, sins notwithstanding. That’s also what the seraph said:

“See, this has touched your lips;
Your guilt is taken away,
And your sin atoned for.”

In the presence of the holy God Isaiah was allowed to see in this vision, it was his sins that jumped at him so terrifyingly; on account of those sins he was sure he could expect only the awful wrath of holy God. But see now what this God of infinite holiness, grandeur, majesty does: this God *takes sins away!* Notice here what God does not do. God does not tell Isaiah not to be too overwhelmed and fearful on account of God’s majesty and holiness, as if God is pleased to hide something of that holiness to spare the sinner, is pleased to come down to man’s level. God does not tell Isaiah either not to worry about his sins since God understands that we’re so weak.... Rather, the significance of the seraph’s action is to be fixed in our minds: those sins are an awful offence to God. See what the angel does: he touches Isaiah’s mouth with that live coal. Try to consider for a moment what that must feel

²⁰Vos, 279.

like! The lips are so laden with nerves; to have a live coal set upon the lips must hurt something severely! On top of the lips is the nose, that instrument of smell, and it surely can't get around smelling the acrid odour of burnt flesh. Isaiah sees the live coal with his eyes, red hot. He feels the live coal with his lips, a searing pain. He smells the effects of that live coal with his nose, foul. The message is so plain as the day: holy God can stand no sin. Yes, so holy is He that the sinner must perish, must be cast into the flames of hell eternal, where there is eternal gnashing of teeth on account of the pain and a stench of burning that forever continues. It's true: holy God can stand no sin.

But see: that live coal with its searing pain and awful odour are for Isaiah not a foretaste of the damnation this sinner deserves from holy God. For the coal is only made to "touch" Isaiah's mouth, and then it's taken away while the angel speaks words of enormous consolation. "See," he says, "this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." That's to say: the gospel of the altar is applied to Isaiah, the work that Jesus Christ would one day do on the cross of Calvary benefits this sinner in Israel. This sinner may see God, this sinner may stand in God's holy presence, and *for Jesus' sake not perish!* Here is the material of Hebrews 10:

"...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

And:

"by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (vs 14).

So sinners may

"draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (vs 22).

Does the act of the angel in proclaiming forgiveness for Isaiah mean that Isaiah need no longer to work with God's holiness, may instead see God as his companion? Not at all! There is a reason why God showed Isaiah His majestic holiness, and there is a reason why God has included in the Bible He gave us not just the reference to forgiveness for Isaiah's sins but also the reference to God's **God**-ness. It will not do to suppose that God's gracious and loving act of taking Isaiah's sins away somehow belittles God's holiness. It will not do to think of God more as loving and gracious and merciful than as holy and majestic and just. One cannot separate God's holiness from His grace, cannot contrast His majesty and His mercy. It is specifically the God of infinite grandeur, the God whose face the angels dare not behold, the God whose holiness the angels praise unceasingly, who is at the same time so gracious as to provide an altar, a coal, forgiveness of sins. Yes, it's exactly because the God who forgives is such a *holy* God that the miracle of forgiveness is so much the greater. That's precisely the point of Isaiah 6: the God of the temple, the God of the sacrifice, the God of forgiveness, the God of the gospel, is none other than the God in whose presence sinless angels cover their faces. At the same time: the God in whose presence sinless angels cover their faces, the God in whose presence Isaiah knows himself to be undone, finished, "done for", is the God of the temple, of the sacrifice, of forgiveness, is the God of the gospel. He is awesome God *and* He is merciful Father; He is merciful Father *and* He is awesome God. It's because He is *both* that He is worthy of adoration and praise, and at the same time worthy of love and trust. He's not just majesty and no mercy, He's not just mercy and no majesty, but it's both: majesty *and* mercy. And it's the two together that gives the depth to both. Nothing makes that mercy jump out so marvellously as an appreciation of His majesty. And that majesty remains cold and heartless as long as that mercy lies forgotten.

That is why the words of Rev 7 are so enlightening, so encouraging. The twin strands of God's majesty and God's mercy are interwoven so that the gospel of grace and forgiveness is set directly beside the God-ness of God. Listen: the redeemed of God "cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They *fell down on their faces* before the throne and *worshipped* God, saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'"

Salvation and throne, the slain Lamb and adoration: the two come side by side, the two belong together and add to the glory of such a holy God. That is why, in the prayer I quoted earlier from the *Book of Praise*, the fathers impressed upon the people not only a sense of the greatness and holiness and majesty of God, but also a sense of His grace and mercy. I quote:

"Nevertheless, O Lord God and gracious Father, we know that You do not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he should turn to You and live. We know that Your mercy toward those who turn to You is infinite; and so we take courage to call upon You from the depths of our hearts, trusting in our Mediator Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world...."

It is fitting that sinners be small, so very, very small in God's presence, and at the same time it is fitting that these same sinners speak to God on the basis of the forgiving work of Christ on the cross. Holiness and mercy are two sides of one coin, and so reverence before God and openness toward God must come together also. In the words of the apostle to the Hebrews:

"Therefore, brothers, ... we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" (10:19).

That's to say: we may enter the very presence of the God of Isaiah 6 – where angels cover their faces and ceaselessly cry their Holy, Holy, Holy. With deep awe and reverence, and at the same time with a boldness rooted in the work of Jesus Christ, we enter the presence of God Most High, and there join the angels in praising the God of glory – our Father in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah's Response 2 (vss 8-13)

We would do so wrong, though, to apply Isaiah 6 only to our prayers. Isaiah understood that the twin strands of God's holiness and God's mercy demanded from Isaiah a life of self-denying service to such a God. If all that could be said of God was that He freely and easily forgives sinners, that He is mercy and grace and love alone, tell me why one would empty the self in service of this God. One would rather carry on as the Israelites of Isaiah's days were doing – offering countless sacrifices and all the while carrying on with a life of self-seeking pleasure. For "God will forgive; that's His job." Similarly, if all that could be said of God was that He was holy and awesome, tell me why anyone would respond any differently than Isaiah did with his plea for a curse. One would rather have the mountains fall on top of you than meet such a God. But now that Isaiah has seen the holiness of God in the light of His mercy, and has seen the mercy of God in the light of His holiness, Isaiah is ready and eager to give his whole being to the service of this awesome and gracious God. Vs 8:²¹ the mighty God of heaven, the Lord, asked for a volunteer: "whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" No mention is made of where the volunteer would be sent to, or how long, or for what purpose. But for Isaiah all of that is now irrelevant.

²¹After the Lord had shown to Isaiah the vision of His holiness, the Lord moved on to the point of why this vision of His holiness was given to the prophet. The two sections of our chapter (ie, vss 1-7 and 8-13) form an inseparable whole, and it's only by understanding the vision of vss 1-7 that one can understand the message of vss 8-13, and vice versa. See Young, pg 234. So also Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), pg 70ff, and Calvin on vs 8: "the Prophet now begins to discourse about the design of this vision, why God appeared to him with such glorious majesty."

He's seen something of the glory and grandeur of this God of heaven, and while he rightly expected that he –sinful creature that he was– would be consumed by the holiness of this God, he instead graciously received forgiveness of sins, received forgiveness *from this God*. Precisely because *such* a God granted the gift of forgiveness to a creature of “unclean lips”, Isaiah could not but volunteer for eager service to *this* God. “Here am I!”, he says, “send me!” Doesn't matter where to, Lord; what can I do for a God so wonderful, a God so majestic, so awesome, so holy, and yet One who has not destroyed but rather forgiven through the blood of Another: Lord, what can I do for you?! “Here I am, send me,” wherever You want, for however long You want, for whatever purpose You want. “Here I am,” at your disposal, Lord. How different, how radically different was Isaiah's attitude to God than was the attitude of those covenant people with whom he grew up!

Do you taste in Isaiah's answer something of how he was touched by the vision the Lord showed him? You see: his eager reply is demonstration that he understood the vision in the temple. He knew God to be **God**, great in majesty and holiness, knew Himself to be a creature for whom only humility and silence was fitting, and since God did not destroy him but instead forgave, the only fitting response was one of “joyful self-surrender”.²² “The cry, ‘Send me,’ was a cry uttered under the constraint of the vision of the divine glory.”²³

Now look at the job description God gave him.... It's enough to make anyone want to throw in the towel.... Vs 9f: Isaiah was to speak to Israel of God's holiness, but was told ahead of time that he would not enjoy the sweet fruit of witnessing repentance and growth in faith; rather, his mandate was specifically to “make the heart of the people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes” (vs 10). This man whom God sovereignly brought into the temple to see this vision, this man whom God sovereignly chose to preach His word to the people of Israel, was told straightaway what the effect of his labours would be: by telling God's people by covenant that God was too holy to tolerate self-styled worship, he would in effect be causing –as it were– a layer of fat to develop around the people's hearts so that they could not respond in faith. God's patience with Israel had run out in the days of Isaiah; though He had through King Uzziah shown how holy He was (to say now nothing of the other prophets He had sent), the people had refused to be impressed by His majesty and holiness; despite the numerous sacrifices they offered in the temple of Jerusalem they continued to oppress the poor, to build their castles, to live for themselves. So, says God to Isaiah, there is no room left for repentance; this majestic God –and the angels around Him have their faces always covered and they cry “Holy, holy, holy”– this majestic God determined in His holiness²⁴ that this people of unclean lips should perish; though Isaiah tell them the vision of the majesty of this God, they would not respond in faith but rather in crass and hardened unbelief.

Isaiah found it a difficult message to bring, and so voiced his concern in vs 11: “Lord, how long?” How long would unbelief embrace the people, how long would they refuse to heed the preaching of the gospel of holy God granting forgiveness of sins through the death of Another? It would, said God, continue “until the cities lie ruined, and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged” (vs 11). Indeed, there shall not remain any remnant: “and though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste” (vs 13); even the leftovers would be destroyed as fire burns out the stumps when a bush is harvested. This is God's holiness, a holiness so intense that Israel must perish because of her sins – in accordance with the stipulations of the covenant God had made with Israel long ago (cf Lev 26; Dt 28). What King Uzziah experienced after his

²²Vos, pg 276.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Young, pg 258ff rightly draws out that here we meet the doctrine of reprobation. Calvin speaks in similar terms.

sin in the temple was only a weak, very weak foretaste of what this God of holiness would do to His sinful, hardened people. Uzziah's burial in a field apart was symbolic for Israel....

Truly, what a message Isaiah had to proclaim! How we'd love to find in it a flicker of the gospel, a light at the end of the tunnel. How we'd love to see God's holiness swallowed up by His mercy.... But the mercy does not overcome the holiness, the gospel of forgiveness as proclaimed on the altar of the temple does not displace or set aside the holiness of God. This people is hardened in sin and refuse to accept that their God by covenant for Jesus' sake is holy, so holy, and so they must perish before the waves of His holiness.

And now observe: why is Isaiah not turned off by this dark and heavy and melancholic message? Why does he not retract his offer of vs 8, not change his mind in the face of the seriousness of the message and the frustrations he's sure to face in preaching this message? Surely, that's because he's tasted the majesty and the greatness of this God! He'd seen the divine glory, and "so there was no recoiling when the disclosure followed that the ministry to be undertaken would be one of hardening and judgment."²⁵ Who was he, a creature, spared and forgiven by a God so infinitely holy, that he should question this God, have second thoughts about devoting himself to blind service to such a God?! In the face of God's greatness, such second thoughts would amount to nothing else than arrogance!

No, Isaiah has come to understand *Who* God is. So he does not protest against the task God gives; he instead gives himself totally to the task of preaching the material of the book of Isaiah – though he knows ahead of time that his labours will result in hardening of heart. He's impressed by the greatness, the holiness, the grandeur of this God who washed his sins away, and so people's responses become immaterial.

Our Response

And we? What thoughts of God do we have? In the New Testament dispensation we have seen more of the majesty and holiness and greatness of God Most High, have seen also more of His mercy and grace. For He's given His Son in love unending and even as He gave His Son for sinners He poured out on Him the infinitely holy wrath that we deserved. In the cross of Calvary God has revealed His holiness, and woe be to us if we are not impressed by that holiness; we shall surely perish before this consuming fire! In the cross of Calvary God has revealed also His mercy, and woe be to us if we are overwhelmed by that mercy; we shall surely perish in His consuming ire! We've seen His holiness, we've seen His mercy, and it's the intertwining of His merciful holiness and His holy mercy²⁶ that compels the sinner with whom God made His covenant of grace to deny the self in radical service of this glorious *God*. "Lord, here I am; how can I serve You, adore You, praise You in song, in word, in deed?"

Conclusion

I must conclude. A popular song of the fifties encouraged us to "talk to the Man Upstairs",²⁷ and that designation of God describes only too accurately the theological culture in which we live and breathe – and raise our children. You will understand: to have in your mind a picture of God as the gentle old man seated on the clouds, who smiles with tolerant understanding at the silly antics of his little children on earth and who welcomes any sinner who would barge into his presence with a prayer does such terrible injustice to what God has revealed about Himself in Scripture. And that understanding of God is a far cry too from the

²⁵Vos, pg 276.

²⁶For an excellent appraisal of Calvin's appreciation for the two attributes together (be it as portrayed in his *Institutes*) see BB Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), pg 173ff.

²⁷That this notion of God remains is reflected by the cartoons printed from time to time in one of today's leading evangelical magazines, *Christianity Today*.

awe expressed by the fathers in generations gone by. The God who adopted us to be His children for Jesus' sake is holy, holy, holy, and the angels cover their faces and their feet in His awesome presence. An appreciation for that reality will very much colour the way we approach this God in prayer and the way we speak to Him in prayer; then we will not "just have a prayer" – as the saying goes. But prayer, both in posture and in word-choice, is then imbued with reverence. Similarly, an appreciation for that reality will colour our appreciation for His Word and the way we speak of this God; it will not do to make Him the brunt of jokes and light-hearted conversation. Again, an appreciation for His infinite grandeur and holiness will very much set a stamp on the way we live and speak every moment of our existence – for in the Holy Spirit this infinitely holy God has in grace come to live with us; so every word we speak is spoken in the presence of a holy and infinite God who is with us always, and every step we take is taken in the presence of this holy and infinite God who is with us always.

We do well today to embrace the doctrines of Paul, of Augustine and Calvin. But we miss the wealth and the value and the punch of every reformed doctrine if we do not share the sense of awe and reverence that the prophets of Scripture and the fathers of church history had of our Father in Jesus Christ.

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Appendix 1

References in the New Testament to Isaiah 6²⁸

Verse 1

John 12:37-41

37 But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, 38 that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke:

“Lord, who has believed our report?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

39 Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again:

40 “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,

Lest they should see with their eyes,

Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,

So that I should heal them.”

41 These things Isaiah said when he *saw His glory* and spoke of Him.

Revelation 4:2

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a *throne* set in heaven, and *One sat on the throne*.

Revelation 4:9

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him *who sits on the throne*, who lives forever and ever,

Revelation 4:10

10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him *who sits on the throne* and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

Revelation 5:1

And I saw in the right hand of Him *who sat on the throne* a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals.

Revelation 5:7

Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him *who sat on the throne*.

Revelation 5:13

And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power

Be to Him *who sits on the throne*,

And to the Lamb, forever and ever!”

Revelation 6:16

and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him *who sits on the throne* and from the wrath of the Lamb!

Revelation 7:10

and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God *who sits on the throne*, and to the Lamb!”

Revelation 7:15

“Therefore they are before the *throne* of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He *who sits on the throne* will dwell among them.

Revelation 19:4

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God *who sat on the throne*, saying, “Amen! Alleluia!”

Revelation 21:5

²⁸The texts listed here are mentioned by Metzger, *The Greek New Testament*, 2nd edition (United Bible Society, 1966), pg 910. They appear here in the translation of the NKJV. I have set in italics the part of the verse that alludes directly to Is 6. The references to vss 9 & 10 are left unitalized because they are quotes of these verses in the NT.

5 Then He *who sat on the throne* said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

Verse 2

Revelation 4:8

8 The four living creatures, *each having six wings*, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

"Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!"

Verse 3

Revelation 4:8

8 The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

"*Holy, holy, holy*,
Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!"

Verse 4

Revelation 15:8

The temple was filled with *smoke* from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple till the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

Verse 9,10

Matthew 13:14,15

14 "And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
15 For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.'

Mark 4:12

12 "so that
'Seeing they may see and not perceive,
And hearing they may hear and not understand;
Lest they should turn,
And their sins be forgiven them.' "

Luke 8:10

10 And He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that

'Seeing they may not see,
And hearing they may not understand.'

Luke 19:42

42 saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.

Acts 28:26-27

26 "saying,
'Go to this people and say:
"Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand;
And seeing you will see, and not perceive;
27 For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.' "

Verse 10

John 12:40

40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,
Lest they should see with their eyes,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them."