



Abounding In Love And Holiness

Exodus 33-34/Isaiah 6

Presence #8

MAIN THOUGHT:

Our word “holiness” in English comes from the root word “whole” like “wholeness;” it is the essence of goodness. It is something that, I’ll show you, that you yearn for whether or not you’ve known what to call it. Holiness is his most defining characteristic.

For most people, God is a mystery. Some people aren’t sure if he exists, or if he does, how you could know; others believe in him — but when I talk about having a relationship with him they are confused. And there are a lot of people like I used to be — you know that you are supposed to say you have a relationship with God, but you are confused as to why they don’t seem to feel any emotion or affection for God.

Exodus 34 is the place we’re working from, where God declares his name to Moses, and this weekend I want to talk about the holiness of his name. You are going to see his holiness all through this passage... **“Holiness” is the most commonly used descriptive word about God by Moses...In Exodus and Leviticus alone it is used more than 124 times.**

Holiness is one of those words that most Americans find bland and unattractive. They think it was some kind of bright, white, colorless light. Or they think it means “weirdly religious.” If you say, “so and so is so holy,” that’s not usually a compliment.

But holiness just means perfection. Our word “holiness” in English comes from the root word “whole” like “wholeness;” it is the essence of goodness. It is something that you yearn for whether or not you’ve known what to call it.

We want holiness in our relationships. Nobody wants a spouse that is unfaithful, or a boyfriend who lies, or a friend who exploits us... We want holiness in our business dealings. No one wants to work for example, with a contractor that shows up late, does

shoddy work, and overcharges us.

Look at how God's holiness shows up in Exodus 33...

And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." Exodus 33:17-20

Isn't it ironic that when God makes his goodness pass before Moses, that is goodness is so good that it could kill Moses? Then God tells Moses to take the 10 Commandments and hold them in his hands — which represent the moral expression of his goodness (TRUTH, JUSTICE, PURITY) — and then he puts Moses in a cleft in the rock and covers him with his hand, so he doesn't die — and then...

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord. Exodus 34:5

The Lord descends; he is high and glorious and above the earth. He is in a cloud: Even though he comes close he is still mysterious. The cloud means he is still hidden. You can't see his shape.

Let's leave Exodus and go to another place in the Bible, where we get an even more in-depth look at God's holiness... Isaiah 6.

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. Isaiah 6:1

Uzziah was a beloved king who had reigned for 52 years. And he had led well, pleasing God, right up to the very end... when his pride got the best of him. He got cocky and one day he decided that he didn't need the priests to offer sacrifices, he could do it himself. It was a flagrant violation of the laws God had set up for his Temple, and the priests come in to stop him and he points at them and says, "Back off, or I'll kill you!" And at just that moment leprosy broke out on his forehead and ate its way all the way down his body. He dies shortly thereafter.)

This leaves the people in utter dismay. Their leader — who has led them for half a century — has just been struck down by God! The very foundations of the nation have been shaken!

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!” Isaiah 6:2-5

The Hebrew language uses repetition to express superlative. For example, a deep pit is called a “pit, pit” and pure gold was called “gold, gold.” **The holiness of the Lord is the only instance in the Old Testament of a superlative requiring a threefold repetition. He is pure and undefiled holiness.**

Holiness is his most defining characteristic. Notice, the angels do not say, “Power, power, power.” Or even “Love, love, love.” They say “holy, holy, holy.” **What does the word holy mean? Literally, in Hebrew, the word (kadosh) means, “set apart.” Set apart...Different; distinct.**

**In these two encounters we see God set apart in at least 2 ways:
God is “set apart” by his awesomeness**

He is high and lifted up. He dwells in clouded mystery. The temple is filled with smoke. Theologians call this the “otherness” of God. Often, we want to reduce God just a slightly bigger, slightly stronger, slightly more intelligent version of us.

We see that in how we demand he give us an explanation for his actions. “God, you better explain yourself; and I better see some good coming out of this...and if you don’t show me the reason for this I am going to quit believing in you or rebel against you...”

We act like we could bring God down and put him on trial as if he were one of us. God is holy! He is beyond the beyond...he’s above the above. And I know that can be difficult...because we really want to shrink him down to our size, so we can explain him, predict him, compartmentalize him, control him...but that a God worthy of worship.

It’s like Evelyn Underhill, British political writer of the early 20th century used to say, if God were small enough to be understood he would not be big enough to be worshipped.

**In these two encounters we see God set apart in at least 2 ways:
God is “set apart” by his awesomeness God is “set apart” in his moral perfections**

God is pure goodness...with no mixture of bad — he is without injustice, deceit, capriciousness, pettiness or impurity. His goodness is so good that it cannot tolerate evil. Goodness so good that a sinner, like Moses, can’t see it and live. Look at this moment in Isaiah 6...

**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!”
Isaiah 6:5**

The holiness of God is hard for us to comprehend for three reasons...

God’s holiness is terrifying...

- The angels have their faces covered.
- The pillars of the Temple, which aren’t even people, are shaking with fear!
- Isaiah, the prophet of God — the man with the message — falls on his face and says, I am lost; I am ruined; I am undone.
- When Job — whom God called righteous — saw God, he said, “I had heard about you with my ears, but now I see you, and I abhor myself.”
- One other place you see this: Mark 4: (so you know it’s not just an OT thing): One of the best stories of Jesus’ life. When Jesus calms the storm... after the rescue, they were “greatly afraid.” The storm had them afraid, but when Jesus calmed the storm, they were terrified. The rescue was more frightening than the trouble!

The idea of a frightening God is out of fashion today — unmodern — but you’re in the presence of human greatness you feel fear. We talk like we want a God who is a buddy... COPILOT OR HOMEBOY — a Precious Moments God who warms us when we are cold...and yes, Jesus is intimate with you and a friend that sticks closer than a brother...but he’s holy. There is a second reason that God’s holiness is terrifying...

God’s holiness is terrifying...

God’s holiness is terrifying because it reveals our goodness to not be good

Isaiah says, “I am unclean; I’m lost.” Ruined. KJV says, “I’m undone!” Because the word in Hebrew implies being torn apart psychologically. The “glue” that held Isaiah’s life together — his sense of goodness — is nothing before God.

The sign that you don’t know God at all is you feel pretty good about yourself. We are creatures of comparison. We tend to console ourselves as people by comparing ourselves to others. “I’m not as bad as...” Or the assumption that God grades on the curve...everybody did bad, so the only ones that fail are you guys that did REALLY bad,” and you assume that category is populated by the child porn people or terrorists, so you feel ok.

But when we see true holiness, all that falls apart, because we see that the standard is not one another...we see real goodness...and we see how sick and twisted and deformed our hearts have become. There’s a third idea to consider...

God’s holiness is terrifying...

**God’s holiness is terrifying because it reveals our goodness to not be good
God’s holiness is terrifying because it reveals our strengths to be weaknesses**

Notice Isaiah specifically talks about his lips, “I am a man of unclean lips.” For a prophet, his lips would have been his pride and joy — it’s how he proclaims the message (Isaiah has been a prophet now for 5 chapters, several years...) For Isaiah, his lips would represent his greatest strength...the way a pianist feels about his fingers; or how a quarterback feels about his arm, or how a scientist feels about her mind.

The holiness of God doesn’t make Isaiah ashamed of his weaknesses. It makes him look at his strengths and realize that they aren’t strengths at all. What’s your glue? Your bank account? Your business savvy? Your athletic ability? Your looks? Your family?

George Whitefield, whose preaching spawned the Great Awakening, only had two major points in his sermons (all preachers are like that). First, repent of your sins. Makes sense. Of course. But second, repent of your strengths. Why? Because you use them to try to cover up your sins and justify yourself before God.

At this point, this is all feels like bad news... But watch what happens next:

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.” Isaiah 6:6-7

Out of the darkness flies an angel with a coal from the altar, and he touches Isaiah’s mouth with it. Now, you might be tempted to think of this as “purification by fire.” (Burn out the impurities.) But that’s not really an OT idea...we don’t see that metaphor used in that way in the OT. Rather, the coal represents a fire that has already been spent. The coal symbolizes a fire that has already burnt itself out on a substitutionary sacrifice. Coal was drenched in the blood of a lamb...

You see, the holiness of God is not just terrifying, it is cleansing...God’s infinite goodness means that he not only is filled with justice; he’s also filled with love; TIS GRACE THAT TAUGHT MY HEART TO FEAR...We see, of course, even more clearly than Isaiah, because we know that Lamb pictured Jesus. This creates a couple of points of application. When Isaiah had this moment, two things happened...

First, it propels him outward...

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.” Isaiah 6:8

It is impossible to have a genuine experience with the grace of God and not become an evangelist for that grace. Spurgeon stated: “Every Christian is either a missionary or an impostor” because “a burning heart will soon find for itself a flaming tongue...”

First, it propels him outward...

Second, it gave Isaiah a ridiculous amount of confidence

And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Isaiah 6:9

God says, “I need a prophet who will preach to people for 30 years, and they’ll never listen.” And Isaiah says, “I can do that!” What gives someone that kind of confidence? The understanding that the holy God is with you and approves of you and stands by your side.

The holiness, the transcendence of God is not just scary. It’s immensely comforting. If you know God is with you, you’ll have the power to stand against the world; you’ll have the ability to live without approval; you won’t be so sensitive to criticism; you’ll live every day with hope and confidence and joy.

See, some of you are where Isaiah was: Discouraged. Success is not in front of you. No one praises you. You need a vision — if you are doing what God says — of the transcendent God saying, “I am with you.” Others of you are where the nation of Israel was, you’re “in the year that King Uzziah died.” The foundations of your life have been shaken: cancer/ marriage falling apart/ lost a job. You’re worried about what the future brings. Is everything going to fall apart?

Am I going to be ok? You need to see that where others fail you...parents, a leader, a friend...” God never will. Others may fall from their thrones, but God never will from his.

At first, we may be resistant to a high and holy God, a God set apart from us. But that’s the only kind of God worthy of worship... it’s the kind of God we crave... a God who is purity and justice and infinite love. All your life you’ve been looking for that fount of pure goodness.

That God is Jesus.

You see, Isaiah uses the phrase “high and lifted up” one other time in Scripture...in the preamble to Isaiah 53, his description of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Jesus had an experience similar to Isaiah. Jesus came face to face with God...and though his lips were pure, he reached down and wrapped himself in our lepers’ rags. But no angel came with a coal to cleanse his lips...because he was the Lamb who was given to die on that altar. Instead of feeling like he would be torn apart, he was literally torn to shreds on our behalf. What Isaiah feared and deserved — death — he never got. Jesus got it in his place — and in ours.

The cross reveals the holiness of God, that OUR SIN IS SO BAD... we had to die; God is so loving he was glad to die in our place.

POTENTIAL LIFEGROUP QUESTIONS

READ EXODUS 34/ISAIAH 6

1. Would you want to experience this vision – or a similar one – yourself? Why or why not? How helpful would it be at the beginning of a mission? What about in the middle of a project? What would make this helpful? What if anything would make it less than helpful?
2. The text emphasizes the transcendent holiness of the God of Israel. To what extent does this reinforce your current understanding of God? To what extent does it challenge that understanding? In what ways is this depiction of God similar to the way you think about God? In what ways is it different?
3. How did God solve his guilt and sin problem? What does this teach about the Lord?
4. What was Isaiah's stunned response to the Lord's hard assignment? What was the Lord's answer to his question? How might the Lord's servant feel about this?