

The Holiness of God

Isaiah 6:1–8¹

The Year that King Uzziah Died.

Our text this morning began with the somewhat unlikely words:

¹ 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 ESV

I say, “somewhat unlikely,” not because we have a prophecy with a timestamp, that happens all the time. But here in Isaiah chapter 6, the vision—the prophecy—is not reckoned as it usually is by some specific year in the reign of some specific king. But it should come as no surprise, really, because Uzziah, sometimes call Azariah, had been a good king in many respects. He was only 16 when he came to the throne, but, according to 2 Chronicles, chapter 26, verses 4 and 5,

⁴ ...he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. ⁵ He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God, and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper. 2 Chronicles 26:4–5 ESV

Because, as one commentator points out,

Covenant obedience brings covenant blessing.²

And so it did, with Uzziah. Verse 15 of the same chapter tells us that

¹⁵ ...his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. 2 Chronicles 26:15 ESV

Then, the incident. In the next verse,

¹⁶ But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. 2 Chronicles 26:16 ESV

“How so?” one might ask. Well, in his pride,

...he was **unfaithful** to the LORD his God... 2 Chronicles 26:16 ESV

The word translated “unfaithful” here, speaks of an affront to the holiness of God—a failure to act so as to ascribe unto him the glory that is due His name. Uzziah, the king (and apparently a very successful king) over God’s people, evidently decided that it was not enough to function in the sphere appointed to him, so, he

...entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense... 2 Chronicles 26:16 ESV

a task that was reserved for the priests alone, and it did not end well. When Uzziah grew proud and entered the temple of the Lord, the priests went in after him and told him,

¹ All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

² R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 668.

¹⁸ ...“It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God.” ^{2 Chronicles 26:18 ESV}

But Uzziah became angry.

¹⁹ ...and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense. ^{2 Chronicles 26:19 ESV}

See, God takes His holiness seriously. To us, it may be a small thing. It seems like many Christians today barely know the meaning of the word. Evidently, Uzziah didn't, and it cost him. Specifically, we're told in 2 Kings chapter 15, verse 5:

⁵ ...the LORD touched the king, so that he was a leper to the day of his death, and he lived in a separate house... ^{2 Kings 15:5 ESV}

Then (some years later on), we come to the vision of Isaiah.

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died... ^{Isaiah 6:1 ESV}

in that year, God made His holiness (and Uzziah's presumption, too) clear to the prophet, and to everyone who would eventually read His words.

Holy, Holy, Holy.

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died... ^{Isaiah 6:1 ESV}

Isaiah

...saw the Lord...

(he saw 'ā-dōn [אֲדֹנָי], the master, the sovereign, the Lord God)

...sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up... ^{Isaiah 6:1 ESV}

In other words, the death of the earthly, political king, had no effect whatsoever on God's rule over the universe. Uzziah, the Proud, we are told,

⁷ ...slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the city of David... ^{2 Kings 15:7 ESV}

but it didn't matter, because the Sovereign Lord—the Living God; the God of Abraham, Isaac, David, and even Uzziah—remained seated upon His throne. Further, notice the location of that throne. Isaiah wrote,

¹ ...I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled **the temple**. ^{Isaiah 6:1 ESV}

And that's where it's always been, because this is not the temple at Jerusalem as constructed in the days of Solomon, nor even a prophetic vision of the temple in latter years. This is the

true temple, the heavenly temple, of which the earthly version was a mere copy and shadow. Isaiah saw a vision of God seated as Lord of the universe, and as Matthew Henry pointed out,

His throne being erected at the door of the temple (as princes sat in judgment at the gates), his train, the skirts of his robes, filled the temple, the whole world (for it is all God's temple, and, as the heaven is his throne, so the earth is his footstool), or rather the church, which is filled enriched, and beautified with the tokens of God's special presence.³

See, when Uzziah sought to enter the temple and usurp the tasks of the priests, he was intruding into a realm where he had no right, and God removed him, not only from the temple, but effectively from serving even as King. Then, in the year that the King of Judah died, Isaiah saw that the Lord God remains in charge, and that it is in fact His decree that sets the course for the nations and peoples of this world. Once again, in the words of the old Puritan,

See the sovereignty of the Eternal Monarch: he sits upon a throne—a throne of glory, before which we must worship,—a throne of government, under which we must be subject,—and a throne of grace, to which we may come boldly. This throne is high, and lifted up above all competition and contradiction.⁴

This is the throne represented by the mercy seat, the cover on the ark of the covenant, and as that cover was overshadowed by the cherubim of glory,⁵ even so,

² 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. Isaiah 6:2 ESV

As the writer to the Hebrews said, “of these things we cannot now speak in detail,” and besides, all we need to do is listen. Verse 3:

³ And one called to another... Isaiah 6:4 ESV

We don't know how many there were, by the way; as He is, “the LORD of hosts,” perhaps we are to infer that there were a multitude of the heavenly host, as we saw at the birth of Jesus, and their message is not dissimilar. They said,

...“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Isaiah 6:3 ESV

And when they spoke

⁴ ...the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. Isaiah 6:4 ESV

And again, Isaiah saw the reality of the symbol that Uzziah sought to bring. The praise of the seraphim, and the prayers of the saints⁶ rise like incense before the Lord of of Hosts, and heaven and earth are filled with His glory at the proclamation of His perfect holiness.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1089.

⁴ Henry, *Commentary*, 1089.

⁵ Cf. Hebrews 9:5.

⁶ Cf. Revelation 8:4.

A People of Unclean Lips.

Of course, the effect is not lost on Isaiah. Having been given a vision of this overarching truth that defines the reality of our world, he sees how small, and corrupt is man. Like the Psalmist who, when confronted with the majesty of the heavens, was forced to question,

⁴ ...what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? ^{Psalm 8:4} ESV

Here in Isaiah, the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable holiness of God wrings a similar confession from the Prophet. Verse 5:

⁵ 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} ESV

In this case, I prefer the older translation, "Woe is me, for I am undone..." or even, "for I am ruined."⁷ Calvin has it:

The Prophet now relates how powerfully he was affected by that vision; namely, that he was so terrified by seeing God, **that he expected immediate destruction.**⁸

This is, of course, the common experience of sinful man encountering the holiness of God—even redeemed sinful man. Isaiah was already a prophet, and even as Christians, we cannot come face to face with the holiness of God—we cannot measure ourselves against that standard—and come away thinking highly of ourselves. In fact, if we think highly of ourselves, even after just reading the Bible, it is an indication that we don't understand something here. We either don't comprehend the holiness of God, or we don't truly know our own sinful, broken hearts. Isaiah, chosen and ordained as a prophet of God, when he truly sees, cries out,

⁵ Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. ^{Isaiah 6:5} KJV9

Now, I don't have time this morning to go into this. It may be that Isaiah was focused particularly on his lips (that is, on his words), in order to let the part stand for the whole. Alternatively, it may be, as Calvin suggests, that there is some failure that is peculiar to the prophetic office of the man, and of the whole nation (or church), such that when we are confronted with the truth of God Himself, we recognize the utter inadequacy of our profession; that when our eyes have seen the King, YAHWEH of hosts, we recognize that we have failed in both word and deed to ascribe unto Him the glory that is really and truly due to His holy name.

Your Guilt is Taken Away.

⁷ Cf. King James Version; New International Version (and others).

⁸ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, vol. 1* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 207.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: King James Version (electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version)*, (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Is 6:5.

Of course, there is a remedy. Verse 6:

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar... Isaiah 6:6 ESV

“The altar” here, corresponding (I believe) to the golden altar of incense that was before the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place. There, under that old economy, the priests would offer incense before the Lord, morning and evening, interceding for the people of God, that all their offerings might be acceptable. In the heavenly reality, of which the golden altar was a mere shadow, a coal from this altar is applied to the prophet’s speech to purify—to sanctify; to make holy—his words.

Of course now—and a full explanation of this would require an exposition of the whole book of Hebrews, but now—in the heavenly reality, Jesus Christ

²⁵ ...is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, **since he always lives to make intercession for them.** ²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Hebrews 7:25–27 ESV

We see this in symbolic form, when Isaiah says in verse 7:

⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” Isaiah 6:7 ESV

This is the definition of sanctification—to be made holy—in its fullest sense. Confronted with the Holiness of God, we see our utter sinfulness, and then, as we confess, “Woe is me! For I am undone,” God, who is faithful and just, forgives us our sin, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. Psalms 103:11–12 ESV

This is what the Heidelberg Catechism is talking about when it assures us that Jesus Christ, our faithful Savior

...has fully paid for all [our] sins with his precious blood, and has set [us] free from the tyranny of the devil.¹⁰

Wholeheartedly Willing and Ready.

¹⁰ “The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1”, CRCNA (Christian Reformed Church in North America) ed., *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 13.

But consider, for just a moment, the prophet's response. Having just been informed by a very reliable source (although the writer to the Hebrews tells us that the Scriptures are still more reliable), that his guilt has been taken away and his sin atoned for, the Prophet immediately hears God Himself speak. Verse 8:

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
Isaiah 6:8 ESV

And, immediately, he responds:

⁸ ... "Here I am! Send me."
Isaiah 6:8 ESV

So, there he is, caught up in a vision to the very throne room of God where, day and night, the seraphim unceasingly cry, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory," and we might imagine that he might be called, and that he would want to join in, to praise and glorify the Lord. But here's the thing, he is, and he does. The Holy God, having sanctified His servant, calls out, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And the servant, having been sanctified—having been set apart as holy to the Lord—responds in praise, "Here I am! Send me."

See, obedience is praise, and praise is obedience. As we've seen so many times, we've been saved to serve. We've been created in Christ Jesus to praise the Lord, not merely in words, but in

¹⁰ ...good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
Ephesians 2:10
ESV

And this is what the Catechism means when it says:

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life...

And, Amen! to that, but there's more.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life **and** makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.¹¹

When Isaiah was confronted with the absolute holiness of God, he was undone, but he confessed his sin, and God cleansed him. He does the same for us. He does the same for every sinner who hears the call of the gospel and turns to Him in faith and repentance.

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
¹ John 1:9 ESV

By His sacrifice, we who look to Him in faith are made righteous, and then, by His holiness, we are set apart to love and serve the Living God—we are made wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. So, hear the word of the Lord. He still speaks. He still calls,

¹¹ "Heidelberg Catechism", CRCNA ed., *Ecumenical Creeds*, 13.

...saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah 6:8 ESV

And since obedience is praise, and praise is obedience, there can be only one response from anyone who belongs to God, body and soul, in life and in death; by grace through faith we respond,

⁸ ..."Here I am! Send me." Isaiah 6:8 ESV