

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

KINDNESS & SEVERITY

Romans 11:22 tells us to “*behold the kindness and the severity of God*”. Paul is instructing the Gentiles to not get cocky about their new inclusion in the family of God. He’s saying, “Yes, you have experienced the scandalous kindness of God, but don’t forget that He is Holy.”

To put it another way, if we diminish the seriousness of sin and repentance then we also diminish grace. If we try to get grace, without wrestling with sin, then we lose grace as well. If we are not melted by our own sin against God, then we will not be moved by His grace in forgiving us of that sin.

At no point does God ever look at sin and say “Meh. No big deal.” That’s not grace.

If the grace of God causes us to take sin less seriously, then we have not experienced the true grace of God.

God disciplines the ones He loves. We cannot ask the Holy Spirit to come, and then resist Him when He convicts us of sin.

Last week we looked at Isaiah chapter 5, and it’s an intense series of rebukes (Woes) and judgements (Therefore). The bad news is that we are guilty of every one of those Woes. The good news is that when we turn from our sin and trust in Jesus, all of the Therefore’s land on His back and not ours. **But if we then deny the Woes, then we must also deny that Jesus has taken the Therefore’s.** You don’t get grace without repentance!

Conviction concerning sin should lead repentance. Condemnation concerning sin, leads us to hide. The difference is grace. Conviction is when the Holy Spirit points out a “woe” and because of grace leads us to repentance and restoration. Condemnation is feeling bad about sin, but without grace. So we try to hide the sin or run from the conviction. There’s no repentance and no restoration.

If you are reading Isaiah and feeling condemned instead of convicted it’s not because you believe in grace. It’s because you do NOT believe in grace on some level in your heart – where it really matters. Grace people repent easily because they are not afraid of judgment.

ISAIAH IN THE COURTS OF THE LORD

READ Isaiah 6:1-7 – read the whole thing, then come back

GOD IS ALIVE, FOREVER

The first thing we see is a dead earthly king, and the eternal King.

He is self-existent. Earthly kings will come and go, governments will come and go, our buildings, businesses, highways, money, and even ideas will come and go. But God is forever.

He is the uncaused cause of all things. He has no beginning, and no end. He was not born, and He will not die. He is not dependent on anything, while we are dependent on Him for everything. He is the beginning of the universe, He is the end of the universe, He is the reason for the universe, and the universe is held together by His hand. Every moment that ticks by, ticks by because He decided NOT to take away His sustaining hand.

Take a deep breath with me... God just gave you that. He didn't have to. He may not at the next one. But it was a gift.

THIS ETERNAL KING IS HIGH AND LIFTED UP.

God is above every other ruler, authority, opinion, power, and thing. He is Lord over it all. God does not bend Himself to our will, we bend our will to His. God is not God because He obeys the law, the Law obeys Him. The Law is a reflection of Him. God is not God because He tells the truth, the truth is the truth because it agrees with Him. Christianity does not tell God who He is, God tells us who He is and we call that Christianity. God decides who you are. God decides when you are born. God decides when you will die. God made you, God defines you, and though you and I may change, God never does. Why should He?

HIS TRAIN FILLS THE TEMPLE

You may have seen the train on a bride's dress (not much anymore). This is a symbol of the highest level of royalty. The one with the train is the most important one in the room. This is a picture of the manifested glory of God.

It fills the temple. It would be like a train that fills the room, flowing through the rows of chairs out into the hallway and all throughout the Triad, filling every street.

God is resplendent in His glory. He is over the top, extravagant, lavish, even theatrical in His glory.

ABOVE HIM, THE SERAPHIM

These winged creatures are flying around the king. Each has six wings. One covering its face because it cannot look on the face of God. The other covering its feet, because the feet were unclean. These are sinless beings, yet they cannot look and they feel as if they must be covered.

As they fly overhead, the cry out to each other:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Is 6:3). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

When they shout, the ground shakes at its very foundations.

WHAT DOES "HOLY" MEAN?

When we use the word "Holy" in reference to God we are beginning to push at the extreme outer limits of what language can do and what the human mind can comprehend.

Holy means set apart for worship unto God. It literally means, "cut away". You have taken something, separated it from the ordinary and the profane and consecrated it for worship.

So, in that sense, just about anything can be made holy.

But when we use the word "holy" in reference to God it gets interesting. God is completely set apart from the ordinary and the profane. But what is God set apart to?

Really, God is set apart, consecrated to, Himself. There is nothing else higher than Him. To say God worships anything other than Himself is to make Him not God.

So when these seraphim sing their chorus of "holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" they are saying He is God, in all of His God-ness. He is complete in all His "otherness", there is none like Him nor will there ever be. Everything else, even the purest angel, seems dingy and grey in comparison to Him.

ISAIAH'S RESPONSE (REPENTANCE)

Isaiah sees all of this and responds in Verse 5

He immediately sees his uncleanness, and identifies himself fully with those he has been sent to rebuke.

ONE – Isaiah has already been walking with God. This is deeper revelation, not new revelation.

TWO – All distinctions Isaiah would normally make between his own sin, and the sin of the people of Israel disappear when he is in the presence of Holy God.

Barry Webb says, "in the presence of God, all degrees of sin become irrelevant. It is the holiness of God which reveals to us our true condition, not comparison with others."

This is why beholding BOTH the kindness and the severity of God is so important. When we diminish His holiness, then we only have each other to compare ourselves to. Soon we can no longer see our true condition. But, when we are in the presence of God, the only thing with which to compare is Him.

The only appropriate response then is to do what Isaiah, and the seraphim, have done. We bow the knee, we cover our faces, we repent and we worship Him.

ISAIAH CLEANSED

Then the most extraordinary things happens to Isaiah. One of the seraphim breaks formation, takes a pair of tongs and pulls a coal from the altar.

This is the altar where sacrifices are consumed as penalty for sin. This fire is the cleansing judgment of God.

He takes this coal and presses it to Isaiah's lips, cleansing him, setting Him apart as God's prophet.

This is a painful picture. I can't imagine many things more painful than a burning hot holiness coal pressed against my lips. Ouch!

"Your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for."

A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

READ Hebrews 7:22-8:2

Jesus made atonement once and for all as our High Priest. No more sacrifices, no more atonement to be made.

Not only that, but this atonement is better because it gives us access to the Holy of Holies. We become a Royal Priesthood.

If you are in Christ, you are a priest and you are a king.

He is building a "true tent" not built by man, but by Christ Jesus.

WE ARE THE TABERNACLE (TENT)

READ I Peter 2:5-9

We are the new temple, with Christ as the cornerstone, and the master builder, and the High Priest.

We are a Royal Priesthood. Kings and Priests in the temple of God, each one of us a living stone that He places in its perfect place.

BACK IN ISAIAH'S VISION

Let's go back to Isaiah 6.

There in the holy of holies with the King on His throne, high and lifted up. His train filling the temple. The seraphim swooping back and forth with the faces and feet covered, singing "holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts for His glory fills the earth."

The ground is shaking, smoke has filled the room.

And instead of Isaiah standing there, it's you. And you belong there.

WHAT ARE YOU FEELING THERE AS THE GROUND SHAKES AND THE ANGELS FLY? WHAT'S THE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE IN THAT SITUATION?

I think you'll act much like the seraphim did. You'll feel fear – real fear. You'll be intimately aware of your own lack of holiness.

You'll feel immediately repentant, but there will be nothing in you that wants to run, flee, or hide.

And you'll see the hot coals at the altar and be reminded that Jesus was burned by those coals and so you have too.

All you'll know to do is bow, and worship with everything you have. So loud your voice cracks, words fail, language and thought and eloquence become awkward and useless until all you can do is say,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;

The whole earth is filled with His glory.”

You see, nobody struts in God's presence. Nobody, pokes their chest out in pride and stomps around the holy of holies and says “Meh, I'll repent later”.

You might say, “Well what about the Father heart of God? Isn't God approachable?” Do you think it isn't loving or fatherly for God to invite you into His holy place?

Isaiah has been brought into what he would have thought of as the most intimate place with God. There is no deeper level than this. There is no level up from here. There isn't a such thing as more intimacy than this.

If you are struggling with this imagery of God, then might I suggest you that maybe you are trying to make God less holy because you feel ashamed, condemned, and without grace. You are not sure that the coal has done its job.

Could it be that you need to not diminish His holiness, but instead magnify His grace?