

THE ONE WHO WOULD BE GOD

Second in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Let's Look at God* from Colossians 1:5-20 and Isaiah 6:1-7
“*In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.*” Isaiah 6:1

Several years ago I was in India and I visited several Hindu temples. At one temple I saw something I will never forget. In front of one temple stood a huge stone bull, probably a dozen feet high. A man walked up to the bull and lay face down in the dust in before it. He spread his arms and began to offer his prayers to the god represented by the bull. People have been doing things like this for a long, long time. In the museum at Ephesus I saw the ten-foot tall, many-breasted statue of the earth goddess, Artemis. She was once worshipped all over the world under various names, going back to at least 5000 BC. The statue of Artemis stood in the Odeon at Ephesus, and men and women came there to worship her and say their prayers. When Christians began to dominate the city, someone carefully preserved her under the soil so that she could rise once more. The temples that men build always contain the images of the gods they worship. They just can't get away from that practice.

In all the history of the world there has been only one exception: The temple of God in ancient Jerusalem. It was empty. Or, more precisely, the innermost holy place that the high priest alone was permitted to enter, contained the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolized the throne of God on earth. But there was no god, no image, no carved form sitting on the throne. Every other temple to every other god in the world, contained an image of the god worshipped there. But not in Israel. You'll notice that we have continued that tradition. We have no picture, no carving of God here. There is not even a symbolic depiction of his presence here. In that sense we worship in an empty room.

Do you know why? The answer lies in what we talked about last week. We started a series where, as it were, we are attempting to take a fresh look at God. We are stripping away our preconceptions. We are canceling the static of our age. We want to see God for who or what he actually is. And that is not easy, for we are looking for a God who defies description. That's why the temple at Jerusalem was empty. That's why we don't have a picture of God in this room. Because every attempt to capture what God looks like immediately creates a lie. Last week we examined what Adam discovered about God when he opened his eyes on the morning he was created. Today I want you to understand as much as possible what you would see if you could see God. Turn with me to Isaiah 6 and prepare to have your understanding of God blown apart.

Isaiah was a prophet who preached in Jerusalem beginning in the year 740 BC. In chapter 6 he describes his call to be a prophet. He begins in verse 1 by telling us when his ordination, if you will, took place. He says it was, “*In the year of King Uzziah's death.*” King Uzziah reigned over the nation of Judah for 52 years. Fifty-two years is a long time. For us, that goes back to 1955. I was eight years old. I remember Dwight D. Eisenhower's second election as President of the United States in 1956. Just for fun, how many of you recall the election of 1956? Raise your hands. See how old these people

are! How many of you were born after 1955? We've had nine Presidents since then! Gerald Ford died a couple of weeks ago. How many of you don't remember when he was President? What amazing changes have taken place!

Uzziah was gone, and almost no one remembered when he had not been king. For Judah this was a monumental change. But it wasn't just the government that was changing. Assyria was rising as a world power. In eighteen years their armies would march into the northern kingdom of Israel and wipe it from the map. Assyrian soldiers would roll south to Jerusalem and lay siege to the city. These were years of huge change. It seemed to the people of Isaiah's day that the world was collapsing.

Isaiah goes on, "*In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.*" Here is something very important and very reassuring that we need to note. Have you ever experienced a time when it seemed your world was falling apart? Perhaps it was the death of a parent or a spouse, someone you felt would always be there, but now they were gone. Perhaps it was a divorce, either the one you had married left you, or a parent walked out of your life. Maybe it was an illness, or the collapse of your business. I think of an ancestor of mine who left Sweden as a teenage girl to sail to America. She left, knowing that she'd never see her family again. I've often wondered what she must have felt as Sweden disappeared beyond the horizon. Times like this come. But here's the point: God still reigns. He's always there on his throne. When everything else changes, God doesn't. The Bible says, "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today,...and forever.*" (Hebrews 13:8) You can stake your life on it.

Isaiah was apparently at the temple in Jerusalem. He's thinking about all these changes. And he's thinking about the Ark of the Covenant inside the holy place of the temple—God's symbolic throne. And he saw the Lord on his throne. He says he saw God, but what he actually saw was a vision of God on his throne. Why a vision? Why not the real thing? Because God was protecting him. God put a screen up between himself and Isaiah to shield the prophet, and in a moment you'll understand why.

In verse 1 Isaiah says that God was "*lofty and exalted,*" and then he tells us what has attracted his attention. "*The train of his robe [was] filling the temple.*" You know what a train is. At wedding rehearsals when we come to the point where the father is supposed to hand over his daughter to her groom, I often ask, "How long is your train?" The bride will be coming down the aisle in her white gown with the train trailing on the carpet behind her. The reason I ask about its length is that the father is rather oblivious to what's going on. He kisses his daughter goodbye, places her hand in the groom's hand, and then prepares to take his seat. But if the train is a long one, he may start to take a step and suddenly see the train right in his path. He doesn't want to put a big black footprint in the middle of the train so he may try a flying athletic flip to avoid it. We don't want Dad injured. He still has to pay the bill! Well, kings often wear robes with long trains as they lead a royal procession. God is pictured as the great king and the train on his robe is longer than any train Isaiah has ever seen. God's robe is unlike any other.

What is symbolized by this tremendous, majestic robe with its long train? It's what covers God, what God wears, what clothes God. Isaiah sees what we call the incommunicable attributes of God, that is, what makes God uniquely God. Let me tell you what these incommunicable attributes, these attributes that no one or no thing but God can have, are. The first one is what we observed last week. God is eternal. He's always been there, he always will be there. He is omnipresent, that is, he is everywhere at once. He is omnipotent, that is, he has unlimited power. There is nothing he cannot do. He is omniscient. He knows everything there is to know. I like to say that God never had a new thought in his life. Nothing is hidden from him. He is infinite, he has no limits. And put all these together, God is unchanging, as we have already mentioned. Everything else is affected by the things around it. You and I change. We grow old. We die. God is the one who affects everything else. He does not depend on anything for his existence. If you and I never thought about him, it would make no difference. He would still be there. He is completely self sufficient. Can you imagine a Being like this? You can't. We can say these things about him, but we cannot comprehend them. Now do you see why no picture of God, no image, no statue stood in the temple at Jerusalem?

Now, look at the reaction this God causes. In verse 2 Isaiah says, "*Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.*" Seraphs are a type of angel. The ancient near East abounds with pictures of creatures like this, so perhaps there is something literal pictured here. The angels covered their faces to shield themselves from God's glory. They covered their feet so there was nothing improper in their appearance. Have you ever made the mistake of dressing entirely wrong for an event? Years ago Barb and I attended an orchestra concert at the Koger Center with another couple. The woman we were with had dressed in blue jeans. Everybody else was in coat and tie and evening gowns. We left at intermission. The point here is that if you are going to be in the presence of God, you'd better be properly dressed. Finally, the seraphs used two wings to fly around carrying out the assignments God had given them to do.

I am not so interested in the angels as I am in what they said. They were chanting. Verse 3 says, "*One called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is filled with His glory.'*" In Hebrew the way you emphasize something is by repeating it. We sometimes talk like this in our language. To stress to someone how much you love them, you might say, "I really, really love you." Or, if you're extremely mad at something your child has done, instead of yelling at them you might say, "I'm very, very angry with you." Jesus did this. If it was just an ordinarily thing he wanted to communicate he said, "Truly I say to you." But when he wanted to emphasize something, he'd say, "Truly, *truly* I say to you...." The only place in the Bible where something is stressed to the third degree is in regard to the holiness of God. God is not just holy. He is not just holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy!

What does the word *holy* mean? Literally it means *set apart*. Other words that carry the same meaning are *consecrated, separate, unique, elevated*. Usually we speak of God's holiness in two senses. One is his moral perfection. The other is his transcendent greatness. This second aspect is indicated when God is called in verse 3 *the Lord of*

hosts. Literally the title means *the Lord of armies*. He is a great and powerful God, a conquering God, a God who rules over all. In one sense only God can be holy. For example, Revelation 15:4 says, “*You alone are holy.*” But there is a sense in which we also can be holy. Leviticus 11:44 says, “*Be holy for I am holy.*” This holy God is so great, so morally perfect, that the angels proclaim, “*The whole earth is full of His glory.*” When Isaiah recorded these words, it was only in Jerusalem that God was worshiped and honored as he commanded. Only the people of Israel acknowledged him as God. That seems strange until we go back to the idea that the truth about God is true whether humans believe it or not.

Notice what happened when the angel said this. Verse 4 says, “*The foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.*” The mere mention of God, the simple proclamation of his attributes, his holiness, triggers an earthquake. Smoke fills the temple. No human can remain in it. What kind of God provokes a reaction like this? How great and terrible must he be?

Ask Isaiah. In verse 5 he writes, “*Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’*” The father of Alexander the Great was Philip II of Macedon. He had already carved out a significant kingdom for himself by conquering his neighbors. He was married seven times. At one point three of his wives and ex-wives were still alive. In 336 BC when he was 46 years old, Philip threw a magnificent wedding for his daughter, Cleopatra. During the procession he carried a statue of himself declaring that he was a god. His nobles were so incensed at his arrogance that they assassinated him on the spot. Most of us don’t consciously proclaim ourselves to be God. Yet when a person makes his own rules and denies God’s authority in his life, is that not precisely what we are doing—making ourselves God, placing ourselves in the seat of God? That’s what sin is.

Isaiah sees a vision of God. He is protected from exposure to God by the screen of his vision. It’s like watching God on TV. And yet Isaiah sees who God really is—the attributes that only God can have. He observes the very careful reaction of the angels, who have committed no sin, yet they step very gingerly when they are around God. He hears them declare how holy God is. He sees the effects of the earthquake at the mere utterance of God’s name, watches the temple tremble. He sees the breath-quenching smoke. And from his safe vantage point, he knows he’s caught in the act. He thinks about the things he has said. He recalls the curses that have crossed his lips. He remembers the boasts as he applauded himself. He recalls the words he has spoken that were unloving, critical, judgmental, negative, hurtful, even destructive of the things God has cherished. He knows the lies he has told. And he says, “How can I even dare to worship God? My lips bear witness against me. Every word I speak about how much I love God passes across an opening that has been used for filthy, arrogant, sinful communication. Puke and excrement have come out of my mouth. And with that mouth will I presume to speak of God?” And he says, “I live among people who are just like me.” And he’s talking about the people in the church! Not the people in the community. He says, “I’ve said all these things, and now I’ve seen God. I’m a dead man!”

Friends, that's Isaiah. He's a priest, a supposedly holy man. What about you? How can I dare to stand up here today and speak to you about God, knowing some of the things I have said? And you—how do you even dare to call yourself a Christian, to even be present in a church today. You've sung God's praises. You've said you love him. Just as I have this morning. How can we even dare to do that knowing what has crossed our lips, words that reveal how vile you are, how ugly I am, and not fear that we will be struck down on the spot? That's what Isaiah is saying. It's what we should say. You and I ought to be very afraid of God. Very afraid, indeed.

Here's the answer, in the next two verses, in verses 6-7. Isaiah says, *"Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips, and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.'"* What's going on here? The clue is the reference to the altar, for on the altar a sacrifice burns. That's what has produced the smoke. What sacrifice can take away our sin? Turn to Colossians 1, verses 15-20 where the apostle Paul is talking about Jesus Christ. *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross."*

Friends, you and I are not protected by a TV screen, a vision, because that did not keep Isaiah from coming face to face with his utter unworthiness and his impending doom. No, The infinite, indescribable God put on human flesh. When we look for God we, unlike Isaiah, now see a man. Not just any man, but a man who possesses every one of the incommunicable attributes of God. It's all veiled. And as we watch, we see this God go to his death to pay for the sins of sinners like you and me, so that we might be made holy. And then rise again. If you come to Christ, you do not need to be afraid of God. Be careful of him. Oh, be very careful. Like Isaiah, confess your sin and your unworthiness. But then trust in the sacrifice from God's altar. And come to him.

Do you want to know God, this God who is so frightening because he is so completely holy, so far beyond our capacity to comprehend him, and so completely perfect morally. He is the same one who rolled on the grass of the hills of Galilee, frolicking with little children, and saying, "Let the children come to me, and don't hinder them!" Come to him, and play with him and learn to love him—the holy God!