

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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20. Isaiah and the Holiness of God

20th of the 52 major events of the Bible. Today we are going to look at the prophet Isaiah and look specifically at his doctrine of the holiness of God. And then next week we are going to look at Isaiah 52, 53 and 54, and the suffering servant and Isaiah's doctrine of salvation and restoration. So we will have a couple of weeks in Isaiah.

Introduction

100 years after the time of Elijah things are still going downhill. The northern kingdom of Israel has had one bad king after another, perhaps with one exception the king of Jehu. Eventually the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria, they came down from the north and conquered Babylon at the same time, but they conquered Samaria, as it had come to be called Israel, in 721 B.C. If you want to read the discussion of it, it is in 2 Kings 17. There the author makes it very clear that the Assyrians conquered God's people because they were idolaters. They had broken the covenant and enough was enough, and God is not only the God of the covenant he is also the God of judgment for sin. The Israelites were deported, they were resettled, most of them in different places along where the red arrow is on the map, and the area of Israel was resettled with foreigners and syncretism fully set in. For example, in 2 Kings 17:33 the author tells us "so they (the re-settled people) feared Yahweh but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nation from among whom they had been carried away." So all of these foreign people came into Israel, they brought their gods, they accepted the Lord Yahweh as one among many gods, and it is this mixture of races and religion that became known in the New Testament as the Samaritans, and hence the conflict that the Jews had with the Samaritans.

The southern kingdom of Judah did not fair that much better either. They had a mixture of good kings and bad kings, and you come down to a series of four kings. We meet Azariah who was also called Uzziah, and Jotham. Both of them were good kings and yet they did not destroy the high places. That's the theme all the way through this. They were good kings but yet they allowed the syncretism to continue, the mixing of religions, they didn't get rid of the high places. Ahaz came on the scene a wicked, wicked, wicked king who among other things offered his own child as a sacrifice. Ahaz is followed by Hezekiah, a very, very good king who actually destroys all the high places, who trusted in the Lord. The four kings, Azariah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, ruled from 792 BC to 686 BC. It was during this time that the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah served. And it was during these four kings that Isaiah prophesied. Isaiah appears to have been from an aristocratic family. He was highly educated. 25% of the words in the book of Isaiah we don't know what they mean. We have to make educated guesses. His vocabulary is out of this world. It is the hardest book in the Bible to translate. It is one of the most quoted Old Testament books in the New Testament, it is dominated with themes of God's holiness and judgment and redemption, and it has the clearest picture of Christ and what it is to be a follower of Christ anywhere in the Old Testament.

I. Vision of God's Throne Room

Perhaps the most powerful, and perhaps the most famous chapter in the book of Isaiah is chapter 6. I want to look at chapter 6 this morning. In chapter 6 Isaiah is given a vision of the throne room scene and he is allowed to see God. "In the year that King Uzziah died (that's 740 BC) I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple." It is a picture of absolute and total and supreme power and authority and might, and frankly it's a scene that words fail. Words fail to describe what ultimately is in indescribable. And you notice that Isaiah can't really enter into a description of what it meant, all he can do is say this is what I saw, and this is as far as words can take me. I was reminded back in Exodus 19 of the scene when God was about to descend on Mt. Sinai in the giving of the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 19 starting at verse 16 Moses writes "On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain, and very loud trumpet blast so that all the people in the camp trembled, and then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke because Yahweh had descended on it in fire, and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder and the Lord came down on Mt. Sinai to the top of the mountain.

II. God of Glory

Again, this is somewhat the same kind of picture of God's glory and God's power, and words simply fail to describe it other than simply saying this is what I saw. And it has been a pretty frustrating week as I've tried to describe what is indescribable and I finally gave up and my mind went to pictures that might be a little more familiar to us. Mine went to Mount St. Helen's. We were there several years ago and I don't think I've ever had that kind of experience in my life as I walked down, well we drove in, if you've been there you know what I saw. About 20 miles out all of a sudden all the trees are all knocked down. The same direction. That was really weird. And then you get within 5 miles and there is simply nothing. There's nothing. And we stopped and we walked down to Spirit Lake and I felt I was on the moon. I'd never been in a place like this before where young trees and young flowers were just starting to grow back again, and then to go up and stand one peak away from what used to be the peak of Mount St. Helen's, and to hear the description of what happened when that mountain blew. When Mount St. Helen's erupted it shot a vertical column of pulverized rock 15 miles into the atmosphere in 15 minutes. It continued to pump out ash for 9 hours producing a black cloud that held somewhere between 1.7 and 2.4 billion cubic yards of material, much of it dumped in your back yard I understand. Lightning created by colliding ash particles flashed around the edges of the cloud. The ranger there explained that when the side of the mountain blew it went out somewhere around 600 miles per hour. Incinerating everything human and plant life that it touched. And he went on and on and over these kind of statistics and all that I could think of was that this is nothing. This is absolutely nothing compared to Isaiah 6. It was the greatest show of force I have ever read about in my entire life, certainly ever seen, and as sitting there looking at a beautiful, it used to be a beautiful mountain and it doesn't have a north side anymore, and it is nothing compared to what Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord high and lifted up.

But then Isaiah continues in his attempt to describe. "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 threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke." These six winged seraphim appear nowhere else in scripture. Perhaps the closest we find them are the four living creatures in Revelation 4 that have the same function and actually say the same thing. The word actually means "burning ones", and the idea is that they are fire, that they are burning, and that they are bright and they are powerful. They stand, they fly, they hover in the very presence of God, and they are so powerful that when they speak the foundations of the temple shake, and yet not even they can look on God. And in humility they take two of their wings and cover their feet, and in humility they take two of their wings and they cover their eyes. And God is truly a God of holiness and a God of glory because what they say shakes the foundations of the temple. Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh. He is not holy, he is not holy, holy, but Yahweh is holy, holy, holy. The three fold repetitions emphasizing, as feeble as words can do the job, emphasizing the fullness of God's majesty and his wonder and his splendor and his power. A fullness that we have come to know as the trinity.

Holy is one of those words that's very hard to define isn't it? The basic meaning of the word holy is to be set apart, set apart for God's special use. And so when we talk about us or our heads or our hands or our mouths, or whatever as being holy, negatively it means that we are separated from sin, positively it means that we are fully dedicated to God. That's what holy means when it is applied to us and to things. But it's something else to try to use the word holy to describe God. Certainly in a negative sense, God being holy means that he is separate from all that is sin, but how do you positively describe what it means when it says "God is holy". Well it means that God is fully dedicated to himself. God is fully dedicated to his honor and his glory, because there is nothing above God. There is nothing worthy of worship, there is nothing better, there is nothing sweeter, there is nothing more powerful than God, and so for God to be holy means that he is holy dedicated and committed to his glory because there is nothing greater, there is nothing more wonderful, there is nothing more splendid. He is absolute in all his perfections.

I was checking John Piper's sermon on this passage because he is better with words than I am, and even John gave up at this point. Let me read you what he says. "The possibilities of language to carry the meaning of God eventually run out and spill over the edge of the world into the vast unknown. Holiness carries us to the brink and from there on the experience of God is beyond words. In the end, language runs out. In the word holy we have sailed to the world's end in the utter silence of reverence and wonder and awe. And then he quotes Habakkuk 2:20 "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

God is a God of holiness, and in fact the whole earth is full his glory. Glory is a little easier word to define than holiness and they actually are opposite sides of the same coin. Glory is the visible representation of God's holiness. Whenever the Bible talks about getting a glimpse of God's holiness what we see is glory, and his glory is seen as a bright light, as crashes of lightning, God's glory is heard, his peals of thunder, as creation desperately tries to proclaim the glory and the holiness of God. Holiness and

glory are the same thing, glory is holiness revealed. Holiness is glory kept silent. And it's the whole earth that is desperately trying to proclaim to you and to me that its creator is holy and that its creator is glorious. Every corner of the world is crying out desperately to describe the holiness of God, and it doesn't matter whether you look very small at the thousands of genetic codes locked up in the DNA double helix in every cell of your body, it doesn't matter whether you think about the myriads of strange fish that we probably will never see in the depths of the ocean that carry their own lights with them. It doesn't matter probably whether we look at the thousands of different kinds of flowers who in all their variety and diversity are declaring the splendid glory of God. To whether we look at the trillions of stars that make of the trillions of galaxies. All of the earth, from every corner of the earth, we see God the creator being lavish in his splendor and we see the whole earth being full of his holiness and his glory. If only we had eyes of faith to see and ears of faith to hear so that when we look at the mountains in all their majesty, when we hear all the different ways that birds chirp, if only we had the eyes and ears of faith to see and hear and to be overwhelmed with the glory of our creator God. The whole earth is full of his glory. How big is your God? If only we could understand what Isaiah understood. But is it not the case that our God tends to become small? And through our sin and the limitations of our flesh, and our lack of vision and hearing, God shrinks. He loses power. He becomes unable to save, and he becomes irrelevant to our everyday life. And our tendency, is it not, to give him Sunday morning as long as it's not summer. It's to give him our soul but not our life, as if those were two different things. But the God of Isaiah 6 is the God of creation who merely by speaking created reality. He is the Yahweh of the flood, who at a word covered the highest peaks with water. He is Yahweh who rescued his children from Egypt, who parted the Red Sea and brought them through. He is Yahweh who raises the dead, he is Yahweh who one day will destroy everything that you and I see and will create a new heaven and a new earth. This is the Yahweh before whom the seraphim speak and the foundations of the temple shake. How big is your God? And is he truly a God of glory?

III. God of Judgment

But God is not only the God of glory and holiness, he is also the God of judgment. Look how Isaiah responds in verse 5. Isaiah sees God and he says "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 Yahweh of hosts!"

I'm struggling this morning because words can't describe this can they. I simply don't know how to describe this passage and my prayer for you and for me this whole week is that God be at work in your hearts. So I'm going mutter on, but it's not my words that can describe God. It's only the spirit working in you. So please listen to him.

How does Isaiah respond to the God of judgment when he sees God for who he is? It is Isaiah's sin that becomes illuminated. That when we see God's glory what we really look at is our depravity and our weakness, and our failures. That when we see God we cannot take our sin lightly. It just doesn't work that way. People who don't think sin is a big deal don't know God. They can't! Because you cannot see God high and lifted up and think that sin is okay. And Isaiah is not the only one that tells us this. It's all the way through the Bible. The children of Israel back in Exodus 20, they've seen God come down, well they've seen the effects of God coming down, they are scared spitless.

Moses gets the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:18 "Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightening, and the sound of the trumpet, and the mountains smoking, the people were afraid and trembled (I'll bet they were) and they stood far off (I'll bet they did) and said to Moses "You speak to us and we will listen but do not let God speak to us lest we die." They understood what it was to have a vision of God, and as perhaps a side note, there are several possible sites for the place of Mt. Sinai. One of them is melted granite. Moses wanted to see the glory of God and God put Moses in the cleft of the rock and his glory passed by Moses and he said "You can only see the back of my glory Moses". And this happens in Exodus 34. How does Moses respond? He bowed his head towards the earth and worshiped. When Ezekiel was given his vision of God in the first chapter of the book verse 28, "he falls on his face". When the apostle Thomas sees God standing before him with hands and feet pierced he says "My Lord and my God". That's what happens when you see God. When we sing the song "I see the Lord high and lifted up" do we really? Do we really want to see God high and lifted up? I doubt we ever will this side of heaven, not in the Biblical sense. Not that many people saw God or his glory and in fact Jesus says "no one has ever actually seen him". Do we really want to see God high and lifted up? When we sing that song we had better be prepared to fall flat on our face, to lie prostrate before him, and to cry out in confession our sin. Woe is me for I am unclean and so is everyone around me. That's the only acceptable, Biblical response to seeing God. He is the God of glory but he is also the God of judgment who hates sin, and so will we when we are in his presence.

IV. God of Salvation

But God is also the God of salvation, and he is the God of restoration. And we are going to talk a lot more about this next week when we look at the suffering servant in Isaiah 52 and 53. But the seed for those chapters is planted in verses 6 through 8. After Isaiah cries out "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. And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me."

You cannot let the imagery of this passage go past you. The burning one takes a burning coal from God's altar and he touches our lips and our guilt is removed, our sin is forgiven and we are called into service. Ignore the heading before verse 8 in your Bible. It's not supposed to be there. God in all his holiness in all of his glory, in all of his splendor, in all of his perfections, he himself condescends to provide the means by which your and my dark ugly sinister sin can be taken away. I have done nothing to deserve it. I have nothing to help him. He does not ask for my help. I do not give it, I cannot give it. Woe is me. I'm an unclean man living amongst an unclean people. All that I can do, and all that you can do is to cry out in your weakness, begging for the burning coal to be brought from God's altar to touch your lips and to make you clean, and then for that God to condescend once again and to call you and me into the service of his glory. Of being fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ.

You know not everyone responds like Isaiah responds do they? 700 years after Isaiah 6, this same glorious, majestic, holy God came to earth as a baby. And he came for judgment and he came for salvation, and he was spit on, he was beaten, he was taunted,

he was tortured, he was murdered and he was raised from the dead. And some day you and I will stand before this same Jesus and the book will be opened, and we will give an account for our life. I invite you, as I've invited myself, to get ready. And we are going to get ready by knowing that we will respond as Isaiah responded. We will see our sin and we will confess it. We will see his burning coals and we will receive it, and we will hear his call and my prayer for each one of us is that we will have answered that and that we will have said "Here I am, send me." Send me as a missionary, send me to my neighbor, send me to my co-workers, send me to my family members, send me where ever you want God, but give me the opportunity to proclaim your majesty and your glory, and your power with words that fail but are empowered by the working of your Spirit. May we be ready for that day and may we respond as Isaiah responds.