

# Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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*Text of an address by Rev C Bouwman prepared for the Women's League Day, held on November 29, 1995, in the Free Reformed Church of Byford.*

## *The Holiness of God<sup>1</sup>*

Martin Luther once said to Erasmus: "Your thoughts of God are too human."<sup>2</sup> It's an accusation, I'm afraid, that can accurately be leveled at so many today who would call themselves Christians, children of God. Christians of today think and speak so differently of God than did the fathers of long ago. Stress today lies on the thought that God is personal, that He's here beside you, that He's here to support and to carry you. A popular song of the fifties encouraged us to "talk to the Man Upstairs".<sup>3</sup> That designation of God as "the Man Upstairs" comes back in the popular notion (be it verbalised as such or not) that God is comparable to that gentle old man who smiles with tolerant understanding at the silly antics of his little grandchildren. Then it may be true that today's Christians embrace doctrines not so dissimilar to such patriarchs of faith as Augustine and Calvin, but one would be forgiven for wondering whether the mighty and holy God they knew so well is the same God confessed by Christians today. When all is said and done, God is perceived today to be not unlike ourselves; though stronger He's still somewhat weak, inadequate, ineffective, a little pathetic.

One would love to say that Free Reformed people are above this depreciation of God, would love to say that our thoughts of God are agreeable to the majesty revealed about God in Scripture and confessed by the fathers in times gone by. I doubt, though, that we're untouched by the developments of our times. It seems to me that we, like so many around us, echo so little of the sense of awe that pervades the writings of the fathers of previous centuries. Our thoughts of God –I'm increasingly convinced– are too small; we're not touched by a sense of awe and holy wonder when we in our thoughts enter the courts of God.

A symptom that our thoughts of God are too small? The thoughts one has of God are in inverse proportion to the thoughts one has of oneself. And equally: the thoughts one has of oneself are in inverse proportion to the thoughts one has of God. To have great thoughts of God, to understand God as the awesome and majestic God, glorious in holiness, is to have small thoughts of the self, thoughts that reflect an awareness that we are but dust, and sinful too. It was seared into the minds and consciences of the fathers of old that in the sight of holy God they were insignificant, nothing. So they could pray a prayer that goes like this:

"O eternal and merciful God and Father, we humble ourselves before Thy great majesty, for we have frequently and grievously sinned against Thee. We acknowledge that if Thou shouldst enter into judgment with us, we would deserve nothing but temporal and eternal death. We are deeply conscious of the fact that we are conceived and born in sin, and that all manner of evil desires against Thee and our neighbour fill our hearts. We continually transgress Thy commandments, failing to do what Thou has commanded us, and doing that which Thou hast expressly forbidden. We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way. We acknowledge our waywardness, and are heartily sorry for all our sins. We confess that our transgressions are innumerable, and that we have nothing with which to repay our debt. Therefore we are not worthy to be called Thy children, nor to lift up our eyes to Thee in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

That, certainly, is not the way we normally pray. Instead of coming to God with humility and knocking on heaven's door (if I may say it that way) with trepidation, in full awareness of sin and unworthiness, we

tend rather to barge into God's courts and lay our needs before the Almighty. I put it to you that our forwardness in the presence of God is indication that we are not duly touched by His majesty and holiness, are equally not broken by our creaturely unworthiness and sinful unholiness.

The committee responsible for organising the Women's League Day approached me with the request to address you today. The organising committee made it clear that, of the half dozen or so topics they suggested, the subject of God's holiness was certainly their preferred choice. At the same time, the sisters indicated they would prefer an exposition of a chapter of Scripture. You will understand that I did not feel free to protest loudly their preferred topic. And the chapter of Scripture I chose to provide opportunity to focus on this topic was Isaiah 6.

Before we turn to Isaiah 6 and seek to be instructed about the holiness of God, I wish to pass on to you a comment made by Dr Faber at the College at the beginning of his lectures on the doctrine of God. He reminded us that it is so very easy, when we speak about the Lord God, to take God's name in vain. It's so very much a marvel that the infinite Creator of all has condescended to tell people about Himself and allow creatures to take His wonderfully holy name upon their lips. It's a greater marvel yet that this holy God permits sinners to know Him, speak of Him. For that name can be so easily abused by those sinners. We today are to speak of God, and so it is for us to be aware that we stand on holy ground. May the Lord our God, for Jesus' sake, keep us from sin in thought, word and deed, as we busy ourselves today with His revelation about His holiness as it comes to us in Isaiah 6.

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The vision recorded in Isaiah 6 is dated as having occurred "in the year that King Uzziah died." This King Uzziah, Scriptures tell us in II Kings 15:3, "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (II Kings 15:3). Indeed, the Lord blessed his kingship with long life—he reigned for 52 years—blessed it too with prosperity for his country (cf II Chron 26:6ff) so that his reign was for Judah a time of political stability and economic success. There was one thing, though, that darkened his reign. The Lord had specifically instructed the people of Israel that only descendants of Levi were permitted to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense to God (Num 3:10). Despite that command, though, Uzziah the king entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense himself before the Lord. Azariah the priest pursued Uzziah into the temple, together with 80 priests of the Lord, and they "withstood" the king and told him in no uncertain terms that his conduct was contrary to the command of the Lord. "Get out of the sanctuary," they said to the king, "for you have trespassed!" Uzziah, though, was not impressed by this interruption of his plans, not impressed by their reminder that he was transgressing the command of the Lord. We're told that he "became furious". While his anger burned within him (and to that degree he hardened himself in his sin), "leprosy broke out on his forehead." It was when he realized that "the Lord had struck him" that Uzziah hastened to obey the instruction of God as it came to Him through the priests, and he hurried to leave the temple. Because he was now a leper, there was no longer room for him to come at all into the temple. In fact, Scripture tells us that "he dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the Lord" (II Chron 26:21). This was in agreement with God's command as He had given it in Lev 13. For our part, we should know that this penalty was no small thing; according to the significance given in Scripture to the temple, Uzziah was cut off from the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it came through the sacrifices in the temple.

We're not to think that the king had no regard for the Lord. We're in fact expressly told that "he did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (II Chron 26:4). But his action in the temple was obviously contrary to what the Lord had commanded in the law, and the reason why the king decided on this course of action despite what the Lord had commanded can only be because he did not regard adequately *who God was*. That is: Uzziah thought to worship God *as he saw fit*. God's response was too clear for misinterpretation: He is *God*, and insists that people take Him seriously, and therefore obey His Word humbly.

It takes but little imagination to appreciate that the people of Israel in the days of Uzziah will have been

not a little touched by that which happened to their king. And they will certainly have known when this plague struck him, and why: the king had thought to enter that temple, in order that he might himself offer incense to the God he served, but God had demonstrated His holiness. So it is that the people, when they heard what happened to their king, were reminded that the God of Israel was not to be understood as not being much bothered by sin; they were rather reminded that their God by covenant was holy, and tolerated no sin – not even sin in the context of well-intentioned worship of Him. But see, the people in the years after Uzziah was struck with leprosy demonstrated but little regard for the holiness of God.

Isaiah's first 5 chapters<sup>5</sup> make clear that the people in general acted with the same easy approach as did the king; they, like the king, thought to serve God, but chose to do so in their own self-styled fashion. They brought countless sacrifices to the temple, all in proper service of God, but the Lord had no appreciation for these sacrifices because the hands of the people were filled with blood; while they said with the sacrifices that they loved God, their actions betrayed that they did not love their neighbours as themselves (cf Is 1:12ff). In fact, the people of Jerusalem and of Judah had no regard for the poor of the land; they trod upon the poor in order to pad their own nests (cf 3:15).

Some twelve years<sup>6</sup> after God impressed upon Uzziah and Israel that He was a God fussy in the way He was served, "King Uzziah died." At his death, the significance of the king's leprosy was again impressed on the people, with as result that the people did not bury Uzziah in the normal burial place for kings; instead they buried him in a field because, said the people, "he is a leper" (II Chron 26:23). That death, then, focused on the minds of the people again just how holy the Lord was: even in death Uzziah had to suffer the penalty of his attempt to serve God in his own self-chosen way. Well now, "in the year that King Uzziah did," Isaiah "saw" the vision recorded in chap 6 of his prophecies. The point of the timing is this: what had been communicated to Israel by *deed* in the temple twelve years ago when Uzziah was struck with leprosy (and Israel was reminded of that instruction at his death) was now communicated to Israel by *word* through the vision God caused Isaiah to see and to record. What we have in our chapter is an *underlining* of the message given to complacent Israel in the leprosy given to Uzziah their king. God is holy, and hence is to be approached with fear and reverence.

As to what it was that Isaiah saw, we read that he "saw the Lord sitting on a throne." The word "Lord" is printed here with one capital letter and three lower case letters, and so is not a reference to God's name, Yahweh; this is rather a reference to God's office, God's title. Contemporary culture knows of presidents and prime ministers and bosses, but we remember from previous centuries that English culture knew also of lords and barons. A lord was the owner of a parcel of land, and all who lived on that parcel of land were subject to this lord, had to do whatever the lord instructed. In a word: he was a man of authority, was sovereign in his territory. Now we're told that that's who Isaiah saw: he saw the Lord, that is, he saw the Sovereign One, the King of kings. This is God in His God-ness, in His office as Ruler over all. In the words of John Calvin: Isaiah saw "the inconceivable majesty of God."<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Calvin says: "God appeared to [Isaiah] full of majesty and glory."<sup>8</sup>

The sovereignty of this Lord is pointed up further by the fact that He's sitting on a *throne* – that seat of authority. The grandeur of that throne is reflected by the words "high and lifted up". The throne of this Lord is not just any throne, but one like none other, one exalted above any other throne. Again, the sovereignty of this Lord is stressed by the reference to the train of His robe; such was its length that it "filled the temple," filled the palace of this king.<sup>9</sup> We understand that the length and extent of the train of His robe is descriptive of the grandeur and majesty of the Lord. Says Calvin: Isaiah "intends to ascribe to God a venerable aspect, and far beyond any human form."

Once more, in keeping with His sovereignty, this Lord has servants positioned around His throne. The text speaks of seraphim. This is the only place in the Bible where mention is made of seraphim. Undoubtedly the reference is to angels. The term "seraph" comes from a word meaning "to burn", and then its understood that these seraphim, these burning ones, are afire with zeal for God. In Calvin's words: "this description holds out to us, as in sun-beams, the brightness of God's infinite majesty, that we may learn by it to behold and adore his wonderful and overwhelming glory."

The position of the seraphim around the throne describes them as attendants, servants ready to do their

Master's bidding. So it is that they use two of their six wings for flying; in a flash they carry out the instructions received. With two others of their six wings, however, they cover their faces in the presence of this glory of their Lord. To be sure, they're sinless creatures, and so it's not on account of sin that they hide their faces from this God. Yet they are but creatures, once created from nothing, and in the face of God the Creator the contrast between themselves and the Lord they serve is of such magnitude that, "as a sign of reverence and awe before the holy Lord",<sup>10</sup> they cover their faces in His presence. Again I quote Calvin, this time at length:

"The two wings with which they cover their face show plainly enough that even angels cannot endure God's brightness, and that they are dazzled by it in the same manner as when we attempt to gaze upon the radiance of the sun. And if angels are overwhelmed by the majesty of God, how great will be the rashness of men if they venture to intrude so far!"

With the final two wings they covered their feet, says the text, and this was "perhaps done as an expression of humility and unworthiness."<sup>11</sup> Here, then, the contrast is complete. God is so great, so majestic, so awe-inspiring, that in the presence of this God the seraphim know themselves to be nothing. This vision in the temple "is clearly intended to place in the strongest possible contrast the absolute divinity of Jehovah and the relativity and dependence of created existence."<sup>12</sup> Here is depicted "the antithesis between God and not-God." In the presence of this God as Isaiah sees it, "everything is expressive of His holiness, pervaded by the atmosphere of the divine: here everything created covers and humbles and effaces itself."

This sense of the holy is heightened by the ceaseless<sup>13</sup> cry the seraphim. Their faces are covered, but their mouths are open: "Holy, holy, holy," they call out one to the other; "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts!" Three times we read the same word "holy", and the point of the repetition is not that the seraphim shout the word three times; the point is rather that it's through repetition that the Hebrew language expresses the notion of the superlative, of being very holy.<sup>14</sup> The fact that in Isaiah the word "holy" is repeated three times makes this the superlative of the superlatives; here the Lord is described as *most* holy, the holiest of the holy ones.<sup>15</sup> Such is His holiness that the seraphim keep reminding each other of it, keep calling the word to each other, and all the while keeping their faces covered lest they see this Lord of holiness and expose their faces to His holy gaze.

Their song contains more though: "the whole earth," they cry, "is full of His glory." It's not just the temple that's full of His splendour—the train of His robe fills the temple— but the whole earth, all creation, manifests His glory. In the words of Ps 19: "the heavens declare the glory of God" (vs 1). Such is the holiness of this Lord that all the earth exudes it, reflects it.<sup>16</sup> All the world is one glorious display of God's perfection and His attributes, and so all men can know of God's awesome holiness and righteousness and justice and almighty power; none is without excuse. "Wherever we turn our eyes, we see the marks of His majesty, and should lift our hearts in praise to Him who is holy."<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the delightful extent of that glory is reflected further by the words of vs 4: "the posts of the door [of the temple] were shaken by the voice of him who cried out." One seraph called to another of the holiness of this God of glory, and that very dead piece of timber that formed the door post quaked in its moorings. In the face of the majesty of this great God, creation itself cannot be silent! What Isaiah sees is "a scene of incomparable majesty."<sup>18</sup> Here is reflected that same excitement in the face of God's greatness as Ps 29 echoes:

"The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;  
The Lord shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.  
The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth,  
And stripes the forests bare;  
And in His temple everyone says, 'Glory!'" (vss 8f).

Calvin draws out the lesson: if, on account of the majesty and holiness of God, inanimate and dumb

creatures are moved whenever He speaks, how much more ought we who can think and feel and smell by moved when a God of such greatness utters His voice!<sup>19</sup>

We're further told that "the house was filled with smoke." And smoke, we are to know, is in the Bible often portrayed as a symbol of God's presence. Think of the smoke that enveloped Mt Sinai when God made His covenant with Israel in Exodus 20. Isaiah can have no doubt: God is present here! And so the reason for the angels' conduct and song is driven home to the prophet in words too clear to be misunderstood: those angels know the God who is present in the temple, and their conduct reflects their profound awareness that the God they serve is majestic, holy, grand in His glory. Here is God, "the one supreme reality from whom everything else derives its significance."<sup>20</sup>

But see then the prophet's response in the presence of this God! He's not comfortable, doesn't take the opportunity of God's nearness to ask of God a couple of favours. No, all thoughts of what he might gain from the nearness of God are swept away in the face of his overwhelming sense of dread: "woe is me," he says, "for I'm undone!" "Woe," he says. That word "woe" is used repeatedly by the prophets to pronounce the curse of God upon some sinful nation or city or person. Take chap 3:11: "Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him." Well, now that Isaiah is standing in the presence of God and sees His holiness, this is the word he uses with regards to himself: "woe", he says, "woe to me". He's not expressing the conviction that a terrible calamity is about to fall on him; rather, with that word he *calls* for a calamity to fall upon him, just as much as with his earlier cry of "woe to the wicked" he called for a calamity to fall upon the wicked. In the face of the God Isaiah has seen, Isaiah wants only to perish, wants the mountains to fall on him and the hills to cover him – anything to get away from the presence of this God! Woe to me, he says, let the horror of horrors happen!

He adds that he's "undone", that he's coming apart at the seams, that he's falling to pieces, that he just can't last here in the presence of this God. Here we're shown something of the impressiveness of the vision concerning God Isaiah had seen. So powerfully was he affected by that vision, so terrified was he by seeing God, that he expected fully to perish, wanted to perish to escape this holy God. The very awareness of the infinite distance between the Lord's greatness and purity on the one hand, and, on the other, his own littleness and sinfulness as a creature, forced the prophet to have no thoughts at all any more of his own merits. As he himself adds: "I'm a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

Such is God's greatness and His grandeur and His majesty that the seraphim cover their faces and all the while they cry out to one another that God is so very, very holy. But Isaiah has his face uncovered, he sees this highly exalted Lord, and he can't join in with the cry of the angels because his lips are too unclean, sinful. "I'm a man of unclean lips," he says, so I can't sing with the angels, and "my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts," and so I perish, I perish: mountains cover me! Woe to me, I'm undone! RC Sproul in his book entitled *The Holiness of God* has put it so well:

"For the first time in his life, Isaiah really understood who God was. At the same instant, for the first time, Isaiah really understood who Isaiah was."<sup>21</sup>

He saw God, so majestic, so holy, and suddenly he knew that he himself was nothing, nothing! "I am a man of unclean lips," he says of himself, "and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Sinful he was, he knew it, and therefore worthy only of damnation; let the hills cover me, the mountains bury me, woe to me, let a curse come upon me!! In Calvin's words:

"...the presence of God and approach to him is the destruction of our flesh; because it shows that we are nothing in ourselves. When he who is conscious of his wretchedness sees *God*, what can he expect but destruction? (Emphasis added, cb).

For a people busy with the death of King Uzziah, here was a message tailored to make the people sit up straight and take God seriously. Twelve years ago God had shown to Israel something of His holiness, shown them that it was not for people to come into His presence just like that with their incense and their prayers; it was for people to know Who God was, take Him seriously as God, and so approach Him only

with fear and trembling, and therefore in obedience to His Word. The King hadn't done so, and the people weren't doing so either, but the King tasted what it meant to be too forward in the presence of this God. The same message was spelled out now through this vision, and Isaiah's reaction to seeing God captures how the people as a whole ought to react to God's identity as God; in the face of God's majesty and holiness all must see their own wretchedness and brokenness.

Our fathers of previous generations, I venture to say, understood something of God's holiness and majesty, and so were able to word their prayers with the humility and grovelling found in that prayer I quoted earlier. Our fathers beheld God in His holiness and grandeur, as described by passages as Isaiah 6, and so they *knew themselves*, knew themselves better than we know ourselves, knew themselves better than the people of Israel in the decade between Uzziah's invasion of God's presence in the temple and his death. Our fathers were deeply conscious of their sins and of their evil, deeply conscious that in the presence of this God they could expect only the damnation Uzziah received and the damnation Isaiah called upon himself. They prayed the way they did because they had seen something of the majesty and glory and holiness of God. They understood who God was, and so understood who they themselves were. Would, would that it were seared into our hearts and consciences that the Lord is a God of infinite holiness, a God so absolutely different from anything creaturely, "incomparably divine"!<sup>22</sup>

Yet even as God in Isaiah 6 shows us something of His incomparable grandeur and His splendid holiness, the Lord also comes with the gospel. For see: God does not oblige Isaiah's words, does not send a curse! Instead "one of the seraphim" –of course upon command of the God who sat on that exalted throne– flew to the altar (remember: the vision has its setting in the temple), picked up the tongs lying there for use by the priests, plucked a red hot coal from the burning altar, and with it touched Isaiah's lips. That coal, we are to understand, was so hot from the sacrifice it was meant to burn, a sacrifice that in turn foreshadowed that Jesus Christ would be sacrificed on the altar of Calvary in order to atone for the sins of God's people. With that coal, then, we are very much at the heart of the good news of God's redemption in Christ Jesus. Here is embodied the doctrine of sins being atoned for by the death of Christ; yes, here is the doctrine of Another dying in place of the sinner. The sacrifice on the altar was burning because sins had been committed in Israel, and the wages of sin is death. The sinner wasn't killed, though; the animal was killed instead. This is the gospel: Christ would die for the other, and the result would be that the other would go free.

Isaiah sees God in His holiness, and so sees himself in his own horridness, and he calls out a curse upon himself. God, though, in infinite compassion, draws the prophet's attention to the altar, to the sacrifice on it. Yes, God has that angel take a coal from the altar and apply it to the lips of this unclean man. We understand the point: Isaiah *the sinner*, the man of the unclean lips, gets to benefit from the sacrifice! His lips are touched with that coal, and so he can't get around it: the meaning of that altar is applied to *him*, sins notwithstanding. The seraph offered the explanation for the deed forthwith:

"Behold, this has touched your lips;  
Your iniquity is taken away,  
And your sin purged."

In the presence of the holy God Isaiah was allowed to see in this vision, it was his sins that jumped at him so terrifyingly; on account of those sins he was sure he could expect only the awful wrath of holy God. But see now what this God of infinite holiness, grandeur, majesty does: this God takes sins away! He does not reach down to Isaiah, set him on his feet, and comfort him with words to the effect that there's no reason to be so impressed and fearful on account of God's majesty and holiness. God doesn't tell Isaiah not to worry about his sins as if they're of no real consequence. Rather, those sins are an awful offence to God; of that there is no doubt, as Isaiah so keenly experienced when the burning coal touched his nerve-laden lips and the searing pain shot through his body and the acrid smell of burnt flesh penetrated his nose. Holy God can stand no sin; it's a fact. But instead of damning the sinner, this holy God *forgave!*

And please do not now think that this gracious and loving act of God in taking Isaiah's sins away somehow belittles God's holiness, such that we ought to think of God more as loving and gracious and

merciful than as holy and majestic and just. You cannot separate God's holiness from His grace, cannot contrast His majesty and His mercy. It is specifically the God of infinite grandeur, the God whose face the angels dare not behold, the God whose holiness the angels praise unceasingly, who is at the same time so gracious as to provide an altar, a coal, forgiveness of sins. Yes, it's exactly because the God who forgives is such a *holy* God that the miracle of forgiveness is so much the greater. That's precisely the point of Isaiah 6: the God of the temple, the God of the sacrifice, the God of forgiveness, the God of the gospel, is none other than the God in whose presence sinless angels cover their faces. At the same time: the God in whose presence sinless angels cover their faces, the God in whose presence Isaiah knows himself to be undone, finished, "done for", is the God of the temple, of the sacrifice, of the forgiveness, is the God of the gospel. He is God *and* He is Father; He is Father *and* He is God. That's why He is worthy of adoration and praise, and at the same time worthy of love and trust. He's not just majesty and no mercy, He's not just mercy and no majesty, but it's both: majesty *and* mercy. And it's the two together that gives the depth to both. Nothing makes that mercy jump out so marvellously as an appreciation of His majesty. And that majesty remains cold and heartless as long as that mercy lies forgotten.

It's the two together that gives the depth to both. Isaiah saw something of the splendour of his God, and was undone. But this God of majesty so mercifully granted the gift of forgiveness of Isaiah's sins, and see: spontaneously, without hesitation, Isaiah volunteered for service to this God. For after the Lord had shown to Isaiah the vision of His holiness, the Lord moved on to the point of why this vision of His holiness was given to the prophet. The two sections of our chapter (ie, vss 1-7 and 8-13) form an inseparable whole, and it's only by understanding the vision of vss 1-7 that one can understand the message of vss 8-13, and vice versa.<sup>23</sup>

The mighty God of heaven, the Lord, asked for a volunteer: "whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" No mention is made of where the volunteer would be sent to, or how long, or for what purpose. But for Isaiah all of that is now irrelevant. He's seen something of the glory and grandeur of this God of heaven, and while he rightly expected that he –sinful creature that he was– would be consumed by the holiness of this God, he instead graciously received forgiveness of sins, received forgiveness *from this God*. Precisely because *such* a God granted the gift of forgiveness to a creature of "unclean lips", Isaiah could not but volunteer for eager service to *this* God. "Here am I!", he says, "send me!" Doesn't matter where to, Lord; what can I do for a God so wonderful, a God so majestic, so awesome, so holy, and yet One who has not destroyed but rather forgiven through the blood of Another: Lord, what can I do for you?! "Here I am, send me," wherever You want, for however long You want, for whatever purpose You want. "Here I am," at your disposal, Lord.

Do you taste in Isaiah's answer something of how he was touched by the vision the Lord showed him? You see: Isaiah was not untouched by the display of God's majesty He saw in the temple; exactly because God was *God* was Isaiah touched so deeply that he cried out his Woe. Equally, Isaiah did not remain unmoved by the forgiveness this holy God granted; exactly because God was so holy and yet granted forgiveness was Isaiah keenly eager to devote his whole being, his whole life and living, to this God. In a word: his eager reply is demonstration that he understood the vision. He knew God to be God, great in majesty and holiness, knew Himself to be a creature for whom only humility and silence was fitting, and since God did not destroy him but instead forgave, the only fitting response was one of "joyful self-surrender".<sup>24</sup> "The cry, 'Send me,' was a cry uttered under the constraint of the vision of the divine glory."<sup>25</sup>

But look at the job description God gave him! Vs 9f: Isaiah was to speak to Israel of God's holiness, yes, but he would not enjoy the sweet fruit of witnessing repentance and growth in faith; rather, his mandate was specifically to "make the heart of the people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes" (vs 10). This man whom God sovereignly brought into the temple to see this vision, this man whom God sovereignly chose to preach His word to the people of Israel, was told straightaway what the effect of his labours would be: by telling the people on the street corners and in the homes that God was too holy to tolerate self-styled worship, he would in effect be causing –as it were– a layer of fat to develop around the people's hearts so that they could not respond in faith. God's patience with Israel had run out in the days of Isaiah; though He had through King Uzziah shown how holy He was (to say now nothing of the other prophets He had sent), the people had refused to be impressed by His majesty and holiness. So there is no

room left for repentance; this majestic God –and the angels around Him have their faces always covered and they cry "Holy, holy, holy"– this majestic God determined in His holiness<sup>26</sup> that this people of unclean lips should perish; though Isaiah tell them the vision of the majesty of this God, they would not respond in faith but rather in crass and hardened unbelief. Isaiah found it a difficult message, and so voiced his concern in vs 11: "Lord, how long?" How long would unbelief embrace the people, how long would they refuse to heed the preaching of the gospel of holy God granting forgiveness of sins through the death of Another? It would, said God, continue until "cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, The houses are without a man, The land is utterly desolate" (vs 11). Indeed, there shall not remain any remnant: "and though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again" (vs 13); even the leftovers would be destroyed as fire burns out the stumps when a bush is chopped over. This is God's holiness, a holiness so intense that Israel must perish because of her sins – in accordance with the stipulations of the covenant God had made with Israel long ago (cf Lev 26; Dt 28). What King Uzziah experienced after his sin in the temple was only a weak, very weak foretaste of what this God of holiness would do to His sinful, hardened people. Uzziah's burial in a field apart was symbolic for Israel....

Truly, what a message Isaiah had to proclaim! How we'd love to find in it a flicker of the gospel, a light at the end of the tunnel. But it's not there. For the people of Israel the future, as foretold in the vision Isaiah saw in the temple is only dark. But notice then this: Isaiah is not turned off by this dark and heavy and melancholic message. He doesn't retract his offer of vs 8, does not now change his mind in the face of the seriousness of the message and the frustrations he's sure to face in preaching this message. And why doesn't he withdraw his offer? Why doesn't he say the task and the message is too hard? Surely, that's because he's tasted the majesty and the greatness of this God! He'd seen the divine glory, and "so there was no recoiling when the disclosure followed that the ministry to be undertaken would be one of hardening and judgment."<sup>27</sup> Who was he, a creature, spared and forgiven by a God so infinitely holy, that he should question this God, have second thoughts about devoting himself to blind service to such a God?! In the face of God's greatness, such second thoughts would amount to nothing else than arrogance!

What thoughts of God do we have? To entrust ourselves and our lot freely, blindly, into God's hands, as Isaiah did in our chapter, is for us no little challenge – to put it mildly. We'd also prefer to think of God in terms of a loving Father instead of as the holy Sovereign over all; the latter thought we find too oppressive. Does our chapter not teach us, though, that it's precisely the awareness that forgiveness and grace comes from a holy, majestic, awesome God that drives to keen appreciation of that forgiveness, and therefore compels to cheerful service of this God?? No, let us be rid of an understanding of God that makes the prayers in the back of our *Book of Praise* sound so heavy and oppressive to us, and let us instead know the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as the great and holy One, **God**.

It seems to me that I have asked your attention long enough to justify my silence. Yet I do not think that I can claim to have done any degree of justice to this chapter unless I take you with me for a moment to the New Testament. The thought lives that the God of the NT is not so hard and holy as the God of the OT, that in the NT the accent lies more on forgiveness and on mercy. Be notified, then, that Jesus Christ – sovereign Lord on the throne in heaven at His Father's right hand!– borrowed very heavily from Is 6 in the fourth chapter of His Revelation to John.<sup>28</sup> Concerning this chapter of Revelation, Prof Selles speaks in terms very similar to those we've heard so often from Calvin:

"The threefold holy [of Rev 4:8] exalts not just one virtue of the Lord: His sinlessness, but glorifies Him in the fulness of all His divine virtues, which are summarised in the one word: 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty'. Comp. Isaiah 6. By adding: 'who is and who was and who is to come', the living ones acknowledge that the Lord is the ever-working God, who manifested Himself in His holiness in the past, who does so in the present, and who will reveal Himself in His glorious virtues in the future. Richer promises could not be given to the church which has been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ; sharper warnings could not be issued for covenant people who turn away from the LORD, and for a world which defies the Most High."<sup>29</sup>

Then the point is this: yes, God has displayed His mercy in Jesus Christ. But the God who displayed His mercy in Jesus Christ is and remains the holy One, the God in whose presence even today the angels

cover their faces. Isaiah the child of God by covenant, Isaiah the believer, could stand in God's presence only because there was forgiveness of sins in the sacrifice of Another. John on Patmos could behold the glory of God as displayed in Rev 4 only because of the forgiveness of sins of the One who was dead but is alive (Rev 1:17f). But for both Isaiah and John God remained *God*, fearsome in holiness, majestic in splendour. Calvin spoke of God in terms of His grace and love *and* in terms of His holiness and majesty; the two were for him not at all a contrast, a dilemma.<sup>30</sup> Calvin's students learned from him to understand something of the holiness of God *and* of His mercy, and that's why they could draft the sort of prayers we find in our *Book of Praise*. Similarly, Calvin understood something of the holiness of God and of His mercy, yes, knew the two to be complimenting characteristics of the Father of the Saviour Jesus Christ and therefore could give his life so selflessly to the service of his God and King.<sup>31</sup>

Ours is an age in which respect for God diminishes in favour of praise for man. May the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth graciously grant that we recapture a sense of holy awe for the God who has so mercifully come to us in Jesus Christ.

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## Appendix 1

### References in the New Testament to Isaiah 6<sup>32</sup>

#### Verse 1

##### *John 12:37-41*

37 But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, 38 that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke:

"Lord, who has believed our report?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

39 Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again:

40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,

Lest they should see with their eyes,

Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,

So that I should heal them."

41 These things Isaiah said when he *saw His glory* and spoke of Him.

##### *Revelation 4:2*

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a *throne* set in heaven, and *One sat on the throne*.

##### *Revelation 4:9*

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him *who sits on the throne*, who lives forever and ever,

##### *Revelation 4:10*

10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him *who sits on the throne* and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

##### *Revelation 5:1*

And I saw in the right hand of Him *who sat on the throne* a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals.

##### *Revelation 5:7*

Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him *who sat on the throne*.

***Revelation 5:13***

And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying:

"Blessing and honor and glory and power  
Be to Him who *sits on the throne*,  
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

***Revelation 6:16***

and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him *who sits on the throne* and from the wrath of the Lamb!

***Revelation 7:10***

and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God *who sits on the throne*, and to the Lamb!"

***Revelation 7:15***

"Therefore they are before the *throne* of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He *who sits on the throne* will dwell among them.

***Revelation 19:4***

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God *who sat on the throne*, saying, "Amen! Alleluia!"

***Revelation 21:5***

5 Then He *who sat on the throne* said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

**Verse 2**

***Revelation 4:8***

8 The four living creatures, *each having six wings*, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

"Holy, holy, holy,  
Lord God Almighty,  
Who was and is and is to come!"

**Verse 3**

***Revelation 4:8***

8 The four living creatures, *each having six wings*, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying:

"*Holy, holy, holy*,  
Lord God Almighty,  
Who was and is and is to come!"

**Verse 4**

***Revelation 15:8***

The temple was filled with *smoke* from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple till the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

**Verse 9,10**

***Matthew 13:14,15***

14 "And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:

**‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,  
And seeing you will see and not perceive;  
15 For the hearts of this people have grown dull.  
Their ears are hard of hearing,  
And their eyes they have closed,  
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,  
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,  
So that I should heal them.’**

*Mark 4:12*

**12 "so that  
Seeing they may see and not perceive,  
And hearing they may hear and not understand;  
Lest they should turn,  
And their sins be forgiven them.’ "**

*Luke 8:10*

**10 And He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that  
‘Seeing they may not see,  
And hearing they may not understand.’**

*Luke 19:42*

**42 saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.**

*Acts 28:26-27*

**26 "saying,  
‘Go to this people and say:  
"Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand;  
And seeing you will see, and not perceive;  
27 For the hearts of this people have grown dull.  
Their ears are hard of hearing,  
And their eyes they have closed,  
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,  
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,  
So that I should heal them." ’**

## **Verse 10**

*John 12:40*

**40 "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,  
Lest they should see with their eyes,  
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,  
So that I should heal them."**

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### **Footnotes:**

1. This paper was prepared for the Women’s League Day, held in Byford, Nov 29, 1995. The text presented below is largely unaltered from the address delivered on that League Day. ([Return](#))
2. Quoted by JI Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), pg 94. ([Return](#))
3. That this notion of God remains is reflected by the cartoons printed from time to time in one of today’s leading evangelical magazines, *Christianity Today*. ([Return](#))
4. The opening paragraph of “A General Confession of Sins and Prayer before the Sermon and on Days of Fasting and Prayer”, *Book of Praise*, revised edition (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1984), pg 641. Further

- prayers in the Book of Praise reflect the same brokenness in the face of God's majesty. [\(Return\)](#)
5. I take the premise that the first five chapters, though not necessarily antedating the vision of chapter 6, nevertheless show us something of what was going on amongst the people of Judah in the (early) days of the prophet's (lengthy) ministry. [\(Return\)](#)
  6. Young, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), Vol 1, pg 235. [\(Return\)](#)
  7. John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, transl. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), pg 200. Further quotes from Calvin are taken from predictable places in this commentary, unless stated otherwise. [\(Return\)](#)
  8. *Ibid*, pg 202. [\(Return\)](#)
  9. The word means both palace and temple. [\(Return\)](#)
  10. Young, pg 240. [\(Return\)](#)
  11. Young, 241. [\(Return\)](#)
  12. G Vos, "Some Doctrinal Features of the Early Prophecies of Isaiah", in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pg 274. The following two quotes come from the same source, same page. [\(Return\)](#)
  13. Young, pg 241. The form of the verb combined with the structure of the sentence gives this verb a "frequentative force, 'and each kept crying.'" [\(Return\)](#)
  14. See the use of the word 'pit' in Gen 14:10; the repetition of the word is meant to convey that the pit was big/deep, see Gesenius/Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar*, 123e. [\(Return\)](#)
  15. See also Ps 93, molded too on the three-fold statement that God is holy. [\(Return\)](#)
  16. Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), pg 280: "Closely connected with the conception of holiness is that of the divine Kabod or glory. The latter is the outward manifestation of the former. Glory is revealed holiness in the metaphysical as well as in the ethical acceptance of the term." [\(Return\)](#)
  17. Young, pg 246. [\(Return\)](#)
  18. *Ibid*. [\(Return\)](#)
  19. "...this noise confirms at this day the voice of God, that we may tremble whenever He speaks; for if inanimate and dumb creatures are moved, what ought we to do, who feel, smell, and understand, for no other purpose than that we may obey his word in a holy and reverent manner?" [\(Return\)](#)
  20. Vos, pg 275. [\(Return\)](#)
  21. RC Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), pg 45f. [\(Return\)](#)
  22. Vos, 279. [\(Return\)](#)
  23. Young, pg 234. So also Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), pg 70ff. See Calvin on vs 8: "the Prophet now begins to discourse about the design of this vision, why God appeared to him with such glorious majesty." [\(Return\)](#)
  24. Vos, pg 276. [\(Return\)](#)
  25. *Ibid*. [\(Return\)](#)
  26. Young, pg 258ff rightly draws out that here we meet the doctrine of reprobation. Calvin speaks in similar terms. [\(Return\)](#)
  27. Vos, pg 276. [\(Return\)](#)
  28. See Appendix I for a list of all the direct quotes in the NT from Is 6. [\(Return\)](#)
  29. L Selles, *The Book of Revelation, Vol I*, (London: Vonkenberg Study Aids, 1965), pg 40f. [\(Return\)](#)
  30. For an excellent appraisal of Calvin's appreciation for the two attributes together (be it as portrayed in his *Institutes*) see BB Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), pg 173ff. [\(Return\)](#)
  31. *Ibid*, pg 176. [\(Return\)](#)
  32. The texts listed here are mentioned by Metzger, *The Greek New Testament*, 2nd edition (United Bible Society, 1966), pg 910. They appear here in the translation of the NKJV. I have set in italics the part of the verse that alludes directly to Is 6. The references to vss 9 & 10 are left unitalized because they are quotes of these verses in the NT. [\(Return\)](#)
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