**Lecture 1, The Importance of Holiness:**

This Lecture is from the Teaching Series *The Holiness of God*.

**About the Teaching Series, *The Holiness of God***

*The Holiness of God*examines the meaning of holiness and why people are both fascinated and terrified by a holy God. This series closely explores God’s character, leading to new insights on sin, justice, and grace. The result is a new awareness of our dependence upon God’s mercy and a discovery of the awesomeness of His majestic holiness. Dr. R.C. Sproul says, “The holiness of God affects every aspect of our lives—economics, politics, athletics, romance—everything with which we are involved.”

**Message Transcript**

I was a senior in seminary at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It was a fall afternoon, and I remember vividly that I was studying by myself in the library. I had a stack of books in front of me, and, as you know, a library in a theological seminary is a place that is quiet as a morgue. No one is ever allowed to talk or chatter. It’s a hushed silence. When suddenly my attention was distracted by this murmuring that started running spontaneously through the stacks and through the open tables in the library. People began to disrupt the whole atmosphere of the place, and people were leaving their seats and their desks and rushing out into the corridors of the seminary. I didn’t know what was going on until somebody said something out loud that was unmistakable. They said this: “Someone has shot the President.”

You can imagine an announcement like that and what it would do to peoples’ normal, daily routines. I rushed outside, and like every other American I glued myself to the radio, and I listened to the moment-to-moment bulletins as President Kennedy was fighting for his life momentarily. And then of course the announcement came through that he died. And for the next day, indeed the next weeks, the next month, the people of the United States of America were preoccupied with this tragic moment in our history of the sudden death of a popular President. Later a book came out that was titled *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, and it called attention to the fact that his presidential term was indeed brief. But anytime the chief executive, the leader, the king, or the prime minister of a nation passes away, it is a time of solemn, serious trauma for the nation.

**The Year King Uzziah Died**

That was true in Israel, as well as in the United States, for in the eighth century a king came to the throne in Jerusalem who began to reign at sixteen years of age. He reigned in Jerusalem for over fifty years–imagine it, over half of a century. He wasn’t the most famous or the most important king of Jewish history, but he would certainly rank in the top five. His name was Uzziah, and what Uzziah accomplished in his reign was to bring the last significant spiritual reform to the people of the land.

He died, incidentally, in disgrace, because he was sort of a Shakespearean tragic hero who violated his own principles of ethics and spirituality in the last year of his life. But when he died, it signaled a turning point, a watershed in Jewish history where from that day on the spiritual life and vibrancy of the Jewish nation went into a serious decline from which it never recovered. I think it’s significant in the providence of God that four years after Uzziah died the city of Rome was founded and a cultural change took place that would shape the whole future destiny of history.

But in the midst of the struggle of that nation a man was called of God to the sacred vocation of being a prophet. Some would call him the greatest prophet in Old Testament history, a man who was not only a religious person but also a statesman in his own right as he spoke to several kings in the course of his ministry. He was the prophet who said that someday in the future a virgin would conceive and bring forth a child, and His name would be called Immanuel. He was the prophet who said that in the future the Servant of the Lord would come and bear the sins of His people. His name, of course, was Isaiah, and the record of his call to the role of the prophet is found in the sixth chapter of the book that bears his name. I’d like to read the first part of that record for you now.

It says in chapter six of Isaiah, verse one:

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were the seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. (*[*Isa. 6:1–4*](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.1%E2%80%934)*)*

I want you to notice in this brief passage that I’ve read here that Isaiah locates this experience that he has in the year that King Uzziah dies. We don’t know for sure whether what Isaiah beheld was an ecstatic vision that took place in the temple in Jerusalem, or if in fact what Isaiah saw was a glimpse into the inner sanctum of heaven itself. I prefer the latter interpretation. I’m persuaded, for technical reasons I won’t get into here, that what happened was that God opened the curtain. He removed the veil from heaven itself. And as John centuries later on the isle of Patmos would get a glimpse of the interior of heaven, Isaiah the prophet saw the Lord enthroned in heaven itself.

**I Saw the Lord**

In your Bible, you’ll see that it says, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple.” If you look at your Bible, you see the word *lord*, and I’m sure it’s spelled L-o-r-d. Is that true in your Bibles? If you go down a couple of verses to the song of the seraphim, where it says, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty.” Do you see that? You see that same word *lord* is spelled L-O-R-D. How many of you notice that in your text? It’s a very common thing we find in English translations of the Bible, and it’s not a result of a typographical error. Rather, the translators are trying to signal to us that something is going on here that is a bit unusual—that even though the same English word *lord* is here in the text, the fact that they are printed differently indicates that there are two distinctly different Hebrew words behind the text.

Anytime you see L-O-R-D you can be fairly confident that the Hebrew term that is being translated is the name Yahweh, the name that God revealed to Moses in the Midianite wilderness when He said, “I AM WHO I AM” ([Ex. 3:14](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ex.%203.14)). That’s the sacred name of God, the holy name of God: Yahweh. Earlier when we see this word *lord* (L-o-r-d) it translates a different word, which is the Hebrew term *Adonai*. This is probably the most exalted title that the Old Testament uses for God. He is given many titles in the Old Testament. This is the supreme title that is given to Him.

For example, in Psalm 8 we read, “O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all of the earth” ([Ps. 8:1](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps.%208.1)), which in the Hebrew is “O Yahweh, our Adonai, how majestic is your name in all of the earth.” And again in Psalm 110 we read this: “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit thou at my right hand.’” This is a fantastic statement to be found in the Old Testament, where David now describes Yahweh talking to someone else and ascribing to that third person the title Adonai, the title that had always been reserved for God himself. It’s no accident, ladies and gentlemen, that the most quoted and alluded to Old Testament verse in the New Testament is Psalm 110. Paul tells us that Jesus is given the name that is above every name, the title Lord, Adonai, the name that originally belongs to God and to God alone ([Phil. 2:9–11](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Phil.%202.9%E2%80%9311)).

Now the meaning of the term Adonai simply is this: the sovereign one. So do you see what’s happened? The king is dead. There is this time of uncertainty and mourning in the land and the Jewish people. And Isaiah comes, in the name of his people, and he looks and beholds the interior parts of heaven itself, and he sees not Uzziah, not Hezekiah, not David. He sees Adonai, the supreme sovereign, enthroned in heaven. I’m convinced, personally, that what he is seeing here is a preincarnate glimpse of the enthronement of Christ Himself in His full majesty.

**The Train of His Robe Filled the Temple**

He said, “I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple” ([Isa. 6:1](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.1)). Oh, I love that phrase, “the train of his robe filled the temple.” In ancient days the clothing of monarchs was a measure of their status. An international protocol would respond to the various levels of the magnificence of their clothes. If a king wore ermine, that was incredible. If he wore sable, that was even better. Mink was sort of second or third grade level. And those that came with canvas robes, they had to sit in the back of the summit meetings of the kings.

I remember seeing one of the first international television broadcasts to take place in America, which was a viewing of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. The commentators went on and on about the pomp and the circumstance that only the British can bring to such a celebration and the magnificence of her gown. As she came to approach the throne in Westminster they had several pages who had to lift the train of her gown as she made her entrance into the Abbey because that gown trailed for several feet behind her as she processed.

But do you hear what Isaiah is saying here? When he saw this vision of the heavenly King, he saw a King whose splendorous garments billowed out over the sides of the throne, furled back along the sides of the temple around the back entranceway, and spilled out and completely filled the entire building. What he is seeing here is a visual experience of majesty that is focused in the magnificence of the garments.

**Above Him Were the Seraphim**

And then he said, “Over the throne and above the Lord were the seraphim, each with six wings” ([Isa. 6:2](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.2)). This is the only reference in Scripture to these creatures who were called seraphim. Some have tried to identify them exactly with the cherubim, but I think since the Bible distinguishes them, we need to distinguish them. We know very little about them except that they are part of the heavenly host, those beings that were especially created by God to serve Him day and night in His immediate presence. And if we read the description that Isaiah gives of them, it seems as though they appear in almost bizarre fashion, for we are told that they had six wings.

Now let me just stop here for a second and make a comment. When God creates creatures, He does it with a certain creative economy. He doesn’t waste material. He has an amazing, extraordinary ability to create whatever He makes in such a way that it is adaptable and suitable for its environment. God makes fish with gills and with fins because their natural habitat is in the water. He makes birds with wings and feathers because their environment is in the air. And so when He creates angelic beings, whose specific task and function in creation is to minister to Him in His immediate presence, He constructs them in such a way as to make them fit for their environment. And hence we are told they are given two extra sets of wings.

**They Covered Their Faces**

“With two wings they covered their faces” ([Isa. 6:2](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.2)). Think of it: these angelic beings minister daily in the immediate, unveiled presence of Almighty God whose glory is so refulgent, so piercing that even the angels have to shield themselves from looking directly at His face.

Remember the story in the book of Exodus when Moses, representing the people of God, was summoned by Yahweh to Sinai to receive the law of God. Moses went up there into the clouds and was sort of swallowed up on that mountain. And the people waited for days and days, and they were apprehensive and stricken with anxiety as they wondered what had happened to their leader. Had he been swallowed up by the wrath of God on that mountain like Korah and his people had in the rebellion? Would he return alive? What would the message of God be if he did come back? And so they waited in fear and trembling for Moses’ return. And while Moses was on the mountain, he spoke with God (Ex. 33). Do you remember the conversation? If I can improvise a little bit, it went something like this:

Moses said to God: “God I have seen some magnificent things in my lifetime. You’ve shown me the burning bush. I’ve seen the plagues by which you devastated the Egyptians. I saw you part the sea and bring a whole nation of people through on dry land. I’ve seen you provide supernatural, miraculous provisions from heaven for us hungry people, but now let me have the big one. God, please let me see your face.”

God said: “Moses, you know better than that. You know it’s my word that no man shall see me and live. You can’t see my face, Moses. But here’s what I’ll do: I’ll carve out a little niche in the rock over here, and I’ll put you in the cleft of the rock. And then I will cover you, and I will pass by, and I will let you see my backward parts”—the Hebrew reads the “hindquarters” of Yahweh—“but my face shall not be seen.”

So God put His servant in the cleft of the rock, and He allowed His glory to pass by, and for a split second, Moses got a backward glance of the refracted glory of God. And what happened? When he came down from the mountain, and the people saw this figure approaching in the distance, they became all excited for the return of their leader. They rushed forward to greet Moses, and suddenly they shrank back in horror and fell on their faces, and they began to plead with Moses, saying, “Moses, Moses cover your face!” They couldn’t bear to look at him. Why? Because Moses’ face was shining with such radiance and such intensity that it was blinding the people. And what the people were seeing, ladies and gentlemen, was merely a reflection on a human being’s face from a backward, instantaneous glance of the glory of God.

The angels themselves must cover their eyes in His presence.

**They Covered Their Feet**

“And with two wings,” we are told, “they covered their feet” ([Isa. 6:2](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.2)). Now the Bible doesn’t explain to us why it was necessary for the seraphim to cover their feet. I can only guess—and I will venture a guess at this point—and that is that the feet, for angels as well as for men, is the symbol in the Bible of creatureliness.

We are told that we are of the earth, earthy, that our feet are of clay. When Moses met God in the Midianite desert and wilderness, what was the first thing God said to him? “Moses, Moses take off thy shoes from off thy feet for the ground whereon thou standest is holy ground” ([Exod. 3:5](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Exod.%203.5)). He asked him to bare his feet, the sign of his creatureliness, the sign of his submission before the Holy One. And so even in heaven the angels cover the sign of their creatureliness.

**Holy, Holy, Holy**

But as fascinated as I may be with the anatomy of the seraphim, these are really minor considerations with the text here. What is really important about this text, as far as I’m concerned, is not the structure of the angels. It’s the message of the angels. Listen to what the Bible tells us. “And they were calling to one another, saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory’” ([Isa. 6:3](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.3)).

I was standing over there before we began this series, and those who are watching it by video tape missed some of the things that we did by way of lead-in. One of the things that this group of people enjoyed was the singing of the classical church hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” And I was listening to you as you sang that. I cannot hear that hymn without chills running up and down my spine. It is magnificent, isn’t it? I think about the angels and everyone casting down their golden crowns beside the glassy sea—that everything we have that is worth anything is something we would gladly lay at the feet of the Holy One—and how this hymn so triumphantly celebrates the majesty of God. But as I was listening to you sing it, I thought, “As beautiful as it sounds, imagine how it would sound sung by a choir of angels.” And that’s what Isaiah saw: the heavenly host above the throne of God singing to each other in antiphonal response a single word, repeated over and over and over again: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.”

Now friends, there’s something here in this text that as English-speaking people we could read a thousand times and miss every time. There’s something very Jewish about this text. In the English language, when we want to call attention to something that’s particularly important, to give it emphasis, there are different ways that we can do that in print. We can underline words, italicize them, put them in boldface type, put little quotation marks or brackets around them, or fill the page with exclamation points. (How I hate exclamation points when it’s not an exclamation. Even my editors do that. I find it in the final draft. They’ll put exclamation points in sentences that aren’t exclamations, and please don’t think so poorly of me to think that I don’t know any better about the use of exclamation points. They do that, and it drives me crazy.) But that’s what we do with emphasis.

Well the Jews did the same thing. They did all of that—underline, boldface, italicize—but they had another technique to call attention to something of particular importance. It was the simple technique of verbal repetition.

I think, for example, of the Apostle Paul when he’s writing to the Galatians and warning them of the dangers of departing from the gospel that they had received from Paul. And he said, “I say unto you that if anybody preaches unto you any other gospel than that which you have received, even if it’s an angel from heaven, let him be *anathema*,” that is, “let him be damned.” That’s a strong statement that comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul, but he doesn’t stop there. He immediately goes on to say, “Again I say to you, if anyone preaches unto you any other gospel than that which you have received, let him be *anathema*” ([Gal. 1:8–9](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gal.%201.8%E2%80%939)).

Jesus was fond of using this device of repetition to make His points. Now remember, Jesus was a rabbi. That meant that He was a theologian. He had a school, and He had students called disciples, or learners, who enrolled in His school. And He was a peripatetic rabbi. That meant that He walked around, and as He walked the disciples literally followed Him. When Jesus said, “Follow me,” He meant literally, “Walk around behind me.” And the way they would do it would be this way: the teacher would give His recitation. He would lecture as He walked down the road to Emmaus, or wherever, and the disciples would follow along behind Him and commit to memory the things that the rabbi taught them.

Now ladies and gentlemen, every teaching that ever came from the lips of Jesus Christ was important, but even our Lord took time to call attention to things that He regarded as being super important. Whenever He would come to a point like that, that He wanted to make sure His disciples never missed, He would preface His teaching by saying two words. He would say, “Truly, truly I say unto you…” or the older translation, “Verily, verily.” Actually what He said was, “*Amen, amen* I say unto you.” You recognize that word. It comes directly into English, and we say, “All the people said”—what? “Amen.”

But we say “Amen” after the teacher teaches or after the preacher preaches, and it means, “It is true, we believe it,” and so on. Jesus didn’t wait for His disciples to confirm the truthfulness of what He was saying. He started His sermon by saying, “Amen, amen.” That’s like the captain of a ship getting on the intercom and saying, “Now hear this. This is the captain speaking.” When Jesus repeated that word, saying it twice, He was underscoring its importance.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is only one attribute of God that is ever raised to the third degree of repetition in Scripture. There is only one characteristic of Almighty God that is communicated in the superlative degree from the mouths of angels, where the Bible doesn’t simply say that God is holy, or even that He’s holy, holy, but that He is holy, holy, holy.

The Bible doesn’t say that God is mercy, mercy, mercy or love, love, love or justice, justice, justice or wrath, wrath, wrath, but that He is holy, holy, holy. This is a dimension of God that consumes His very essence, and when it is manifest to Isaiah, we read that “at the sound of the voices of the seraphim the doorposts, the thresholds of the temple itself shook and began to tremble” ([Isa. 6:4](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa.%206.4)). Do you hear that? Inanimate, lifeless, unintelligible parts of creation in the presence of the manifestation of the holiness of God had the good sense to be moved. How can we, made in His image, be indifferent or apathetic to His majesty?

God alone is holy, and what I want to do in this series is try to describe what that means and what the reaction of Isaiah and other people historically is when the holy appears.