#### Lecture 2: The Trauma 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

Not too long ago a woman from Oakland, California spoke to me, and she was angry. She was distressed and said that she was angry with her pastor. And I said, “Well why are you angry with your pastor?” She said: “I get the feeling that, for some reason, my minister every Sunday morning is doing everything that he can to conceal the true identity of God from the congregation. I come to church, and I long to have an opportunity to worship, to have my soul experience reverence for God and adoration. But the God that I’m hearing about is a God that has been defanged—he’s been tamed. He has become innocuous, and I’m sure that the reason the minister does this is because he doesn’t want to frighten people by explaining the true character of God.”

I don’t know how accurate that woman’s complaint was, but I know we all have a tendency to soft-pedal the biblical portrait of God, and there’s a reason for that. The reason is that the holiness of God is traumatic to unholy people. That becomes clear if we look at the rest of the text of Isaiah. We’ve already seen Isaiah’s record of his vision of the holiness of God, and what I’d like to look at now is what happened to Isaiah in response to what he saw.

#### Trembling before God

In the early chapters of the Institutes of the Christian Religion, written by John Calvin, he makes a statement that goes something like this: “Hence that dread and terror by which holy men of old trembled before God, as Scripture uniformly relates.” What Calvin was saying is that there is a pattern to human responses to the presence of God in the Scripture. And it seems that the more righteous the person is described, the more he trembles when he enters the immediate presence of God.

There is nothing cavalier or casual about the response of Habakkuk when he meets the holy God. Do you remember Habakkuk’s complaint, where he saw all of the degradation and injustices that were sweeping across the landscape in his homeland? He was so offended by this that he went up into his watchtower, and he complained against God and said: “God, you are so holy that you can’t even behold iniquity. How can you stand by and let all of these things come to pass?” (cf. Hab. 1:13). He said, “I’m going to sit up here, and I’m going to wait until God answers my question.” And you remember what happened. When God appeared to Habakkuk, he said, “My lips quivered, my body trembled, and rottenness entered into my bones” (Hab. 3:16).

What happened to Job when he waited for the voice of God? When God showed Himself to Job, Job said: “I abhor myself. I repent in dust and ashes. I have spoken once; I will speak no more. I will take my hand and put it upon my mouth” (cf. Job 42:6). As Calvin said, the uniform report of sacred Scripture is that every human being who is ever exposed to the holiness of God trembles in His presence. That was no less true of Isaiah.

#### Weal and Woe

Now think of Isaiah. I haven’t made a moral survey of eighth-century Israel, but I can’t imagine that there was any human being running around in the Jewish nation at that time who, humanly speaking, was more righteous than Isaiah. He was about as righteous as human beings could be found in those days, and he has this glimpse of the holiness of God. The first thing he does when he sees the holiness of God is cry out in terror. The King James Version records his words, saying this: “Woe is me! for I am undone” (Isa. 6:5).

I know that more recent translations have tried to change the language there, because nobody talks like that anymore. Nobody says, “Woe is me.” That word is kind of antiquated. The expression is an archaism. It’s like somebody saying “forsooth” or “alas and alack.” Nobody talks that way unless you have some Jewish friends. Sometimes when things go wrong they’ll say “Oi vei ist mir,” which is the Yiddish rendition of the same verbiage here, “Woe is me.” But for the most part, we don’t hear people talk like that in our culture. So translators, in trying to communicate the Word of God in modern verbiage, will do away with some of this archaic language. But when we do that, sadly, we’re in danger of missing another one of those semi-hidden gems of biblical literature.

There is a reason why Isaiah used the word “woe.” In the Old Testament, a prophet was a person anointed by God to be His spokesman. The simple definition that distinguished the prophet from the priest in Israel was this: it was the task of the priest to speak to God on behalf of the people; it was the task of the prophet to speak to the people on behalf of God. So when the prophet uttered his message, he wouldn’t preface his statement by saying, “In my humble opinion,” or, “It is my judgment that,” or, “I think that perhaps this may be the case.” That’s not how they addressed the people. When they gave their message, they prefaced their words by saying, “Thus saith the Lord,” because they understood that they were vessels of divine announcement.

The literary form that was common to the prophet of Israel was the form that we call “the oracle.” You’ve heard, I’m sure, of a Greek oracle—the oracle of Delphi—who would give these announcements about the future. Well among the Jews, the oracular literary device—the oracle—was of two types. There were oracles of weal, and oracles of woe. Now that means that there were announcements that came from God which were good news, and announcements which were bad news.

An oracle of weal—or an oracle of prosperity—used a word that was important to this oracle among the Jews to introduce the good news, and it was the word “blessed.” Jesus obviously uses the form of the oracle, self-consciously, as a prophet when He gives the Sermon on the Mount. The people of His day would have recognized the significance of His giving this list of sayings, that He would say: “Blessed are the poor in spirit… Blessed are those who mourn… Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness… Blessed are the pure in heart… Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:3-9). He was pronouncing the oracle of God’s weal upon the people—the divine blessing, the divine benediction—to those who did these certain things.

The flip side of the oracle of weal was the oracle of woe, which was a grim and terrifying announcement of God’s judgment. Hear the prophet Amos, when he announces the judgment of God upon the nations and upon the cities: “For three transgressions and four of Damascus, woe unto you” (Amos 1:3). Jesus, when He gave His scathing denunciation of the Pharisees, prefaced His words of judgment using the Old Testament prophetic oracle by saying: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You cross land and sea to make one convert, and once you’ve made him, you make him twice the child of hell than you are yourselves” (Matt. 23:15).

I mentioned in our first session how rare it is in all of Scripture for anything to be raised to the repetitive level of the superlative. I said the only attribute of God that is ever repeated to the third degree is the attribute of holiness: holy, holy, holy. But it’s not the only thing that is repeated to the third degree. Jeremiah the prophet, when he went and gave the judgment of God before the temple, he said that they come and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord” (Jer. 7:4). Jeremiah was saying, in effect: “Your hypocrisy is to the nth degree. You trust in lying words that cannot profit.”

The darkest hour of this planet is foretold to us in the apocalypse of the New Testament, where we are told that in that last hour the bowls of divine wrath will be poured out upon this planet. And we hear of this heavenly figure flying across the darkened sky announcing the final judgment of God with the repetition of one word: “Woe, woe, woe” (Rev. 8:13). You don’t want to be around when that bird starts to sing.

#### “I Am Undone”

Do you see what happens here in the sixth chapter of Isaiah? One who is called of God and set apart, whose words are the very words of God placed in his mouth—the first oracle he pronounces is an oracle of doom upon himself: “Woe is me!” As soon as Isaiah sees the unveiled holiness of God, for the first time in Isaiah’s life, he understands who God is. The very second that Isaiah understood who God was, for the first time in his life, he understood who Isaiah was. And what came out of his mouth was something akin to a primordial scream, where he curses himself: “Woe is me! for I am undone.”

I know the more modern translations use, “for I am ruined.” But I like this old one, “undone,” for this reason. If we looked at what’s happening here through the glasses of modern psychoanalysis, we could describe this experience that Isaiah relates as an experience of psychological disintegration—that is, dis-integration.

We use words to describe a person who is healthy and say that a person is whole—he has everything together. When we see somebody who is losing it, we say, “He’s falling apart.” (Isn’t it interesting that a synonym we use for “virtue” in our language is the word “integrity”? That is, that we have everything about our lives meshed together in a coherent and a consistent way.) And here is the man Isaiah, who possesses the most integrity of the Jewish people, who comes and gets one glimpse of the holiness of God, and he immediately suffers disintegration. He comes apart.

That’s what happens to people who catch a glimpse of the character of God. Do you see that we spend our entire lives veiling ourselves from the true character of God? Our natural bent, our natural inclination, is to hide ourselves from Him, because we know instinctively that as soon as the holy appears it exposes and reveals anything and anyone who is not holy by virtue of that standard.

We have a justification for every sin that we commit. We are masters of self-deceit. Calvin makes this statement, “So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than demigods.” We do what the apostle Paul warned us not to do when he said, “Those who judge themselves by themselves and judge themselves among themselves are not wise” (2 Cor. 10:12).

#### Nobody’s Perfect

Let me tell you something about human nature. We could go out into the streets of America and ask this question to everyone on the street, and I can’t believe how many people would answer it the same way. If I asked people, “Are you perfect?” I’d be willing to bet that ninety-nine out of one hundred people we asked that question, no matter their background, would say, “No, I’m not perfect.” The one axiom all Americans would vote for is that nobody’s perfect. Errare humanum est: “to err is human.”

Nobody’s perfect, but that doesn’t seem to bother us at all. There’s not one person in one thousand who will claim to be perfect, and there’s not one person in one thousand who understands the seriousness of not being perfect. The standard by which we will be judged ultimately is not a curve, but it will be the standard of God’s perfection.

Now I hear this: “Sure, everybody’s entitled to one mistake.” Says who? Where did God ever say, “You can all have one mistake, one free sin, one free act of treason against my authority, one free insult to my integrity”? He never said that, did He? But even if He did, how long ago did you use yours up?

“Everybody’s entitled to one mistake.” I hope we get more than one. One mistake a second is more like it. But you see, we’re comfortable with our imperfection. We judge ourselves by each other, no matter how ashamed I may be of the weaknesses in my life. And sometimes when I look inside myself, I make myself sick. Don’t you feel like that? Do you ever disgust yourself? “How could I do that? I can’t believe that I’m that selfish,” or, “I can’t believe that I’m that covetous or lustful,” or whatever it is.

But we are quick to excuse ourselves. We look around and we can always find someone who is more depraved that we are, at least on the surface. So we can be like the Pharisee that Jesus talked about that went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee said, “Oh God, I thank you that I’m not like that miserable guy over there.” And we find a way to excuse ourselves, and to flatter ourselves until we see the standard.

When that happens, we are undone as Isaiah was undone. When he saw pure holiness, he understood what it was that he wasn’t. He couldn’t stand it, and he’s on his face, screaming out in pain, and he’s saying: “Woe is me! for I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isa. 6:5).

#### A Dirty Mouth

I wonder why he said what he said. When he cries out now in his terror he is saying, “I’m undone because I have a dirty mouth.” And I wonder why it went to his mouth.

If you read the teaching of Jesus, one of the things that comes through again and again is a lesson that almost no one in the twentieth century believes anymore. If Jesus of Nazareth taught anything, He taught repeatedly that some day every human being would be called before the tribunal of God—that every one of us will have to give an account before the holy Creator of heaven and earth.

Jesus says on that day every idle word we have ever spoken will be brought into the judgment (Matt. 12:36), that everything we’ve ever done—everything that we’ve ever said, every promise we’ve ever made and broken, every blasphemous statement that’s come from our mouth, every slanderous word that we’ve made towards our neighbor—will be brought up on the table. Jesus said that it’s not what goes into a man’s mouth that defiles a man; it’s what comes out (Matt. 15:11).

God has given us our mouths as vehicles to praise Him and to express His truth, and instead we’ve used our mouths to lie, to hurt other people, to blaspheme God. We have dirty mouths. When Isaiah saw the holiness of God, his hand went instinctively to his mouth as he cried out this curse upon himself.

#### Your Sin Is Atoned For

Now ladies and gentlemen, what did God do? Did God look down from the throne and see His servant writhing in the dust in all of his remorse and repentance, like some medieval monk in a monastery involved in self-flagellation, and say: “Come, come, come now, Isaiah. You’re taking yourself far too seriously. Don’t have such a morbid preoccupation with your own guilt. You’re going to give a lifetime of study to the likes of Sigmund Freud carrying on like this. Don’t be so neurotic. You’ve got a guilt hang-up. I mean, you must have been reading Jonathan Edwards or anticipating Queen Victoria.”

That’s not what He did. Nor did God look at His servant writhing in the dirt and say to him: “Suffer, you miserable creep; you deserve to be undone and ruined. Go ahead and let the curse fall upon yourself. I’ve had it with the likes of you, Isaiah. I’ll catch you later.” That’s not what He did.

I’ll tell you something else He didn’t do, ladies and gentlemen. God didn’t say a word to Isaiah about cheap grace. God didn’t say, “Look Isaiah, all I want you to do is sign your name on a membership card or raise your hand, and you can come into my kingdom.”

No, God saw His servant in pain, and He nodded to one of the seraphim. And the seraph went over to the altar where the white-hot coals were burning there in the holy place. The coals were so hot that even the angel’s flesh couldn’t come in contact with them—he had to use tongs. And with these tongs he took one of these white-hot coals, and he flew over to Isaiah, and we read in the text that he placed this hot coal on his lips.

Do you know how sensitive the human lips are? It’s with our lips that we express one of the most intimate forms of tactile communication: the kiss. The nerve endings of the lips are hypersensitive, and yet this man has the experience of having a hot coal placed right on his lips. You know what happened is the instant that coal touched his lips there was a huge blister formed on them. You can hear his flesh sizzling. Why? Because God was being cruel and unusual in His punishment of Isaiah? No. The coal was applied to cauterize his lips—to purify him, to heal them, to prepare them for the message that he was to give. Listen to what it says: “One of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And with it he touched my mouth and said: ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for’” (Isa. 6:6–7).

I’m a Protestant by conviction, but one of the things I miss from the Roman Catholic tradition is the confessional. Yes, the confessional is at the heart of the Protestant controversy, but only one element—and we have a tendency to throw the baby out with the bathwater. How I long to be able to go someplace, to someone I can see and hear and experience, in their real presence, and say, “Father, I have sinned, this is what I have done,” and list my transgressions, get them off my chest, and then be able to get on my knees and hear somebody say to me: “In the name of Jesus Christ, ego te absolvo—‘I absolve you.’ Your sins are forgiven.”

How would you like Christ to come in this room right now and walk to where you are, privately, and say to you: “I know about every one of your sins, but right now I want to tell you that every sin that you’ve ever committed in your life is forgiven. Your guilt is taken away—all of it. You never again have to worry about the sins you have committed against God. I am forgiving you and cleansing you this moment and forever.” What would you give to hear Jesus say that today? That’s what God said to Isaiah: “It’s gone, Isaiah—all of your guilt. You don’t have to speak the curse any longer. I’m taking it away. Your sins are forgiven; they are atoned for.”

And as Isaiah is trying to deal with that, God speaks once more and says, “Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?” (Isa. 6:8). And the first thing Isaiah says after cursing himself is what? “Here am I! Send me.” Notice he didn’t say, “Here I am”; that would be telling God his geographical location. No, he said, “God, here am I.” He could hardly say it through these lips.

The price of repentance is very, very painful. True repentance is honest before God, and to come into the presence of the holy God is a painful thing. But when we come humbly, as Isaiah did—when we come on our face—God is ready to forgive, to cleanse, and to send.

The only justification for any missionary’s mission, and for any preacher’s preaching, is that that person has experienced the forgiveness of God.