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God is Holy
Isaiah 6:1-3

Is. 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Introduction

We have funny ideas of what holiness means. I think a lot of people when they hear "holy" they will think of things like Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark or Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade where they pursue the Holy Grail. Granted the idea that if you open the Ark it will melt your face or if you drink from the grail it will heal you and grant eternal life likely stems from the religious superstitions which come from the religious relics often associated with the RCC. We need to be wary of superstitions and carefully define what holiness is and isn't according to the scriptures.

But what does it mean for something to be holy? What is holiness? More fundamentally what does it mean for God to be holy? Now here we are dealing with an attribute of God which is an attribute which he has in absolute perfection, but one we reflect as creatures made in his image. When you study holiness in the Bible you see it presented in a relational sense. Things, people, places, objects, promises, activities, days are holy. But God is different because he doesn't depend upon other things for his attributes. Thus when we say God is holy while we certainly do contrast God's holiness with that of creation to help us understand we must recognize that God is holy in a way which transcends any relational sense we might give it. God gives definition to what holiness is. Our holiness is derived from his holiness. So let's begin tonight with God and his holiness.

God is Holy

God is absolutely holy - Is. 6:3, Rev. 4:8

The Puritan Stephen Charnock points out that it is very natural for us to focus upon the attributes of God we find the most comforting. Yet we should pay attention to the ones which God presents to us. And in terms of what God tells us about himself, there is only one attribute which is presented to us in repetition: holiness. Now repetition is a way of getting attention and of strengthening a concept. When God warned Adam and Eve about the Tree of Knowledge he told them if they ate of it they would "die die." This was certain death, not just physical, but spiritual death. Pure gold in 2 Kings 25:15 is actually "gold gold" and "tar pits" is really "pit pits" in Genesis 14:10. And so we find in Isaiah's vision of God on the throne and John's vision as well the 3 fold repetition of holiness. It is striking that God is not said to be love, love, love or mercy, mercy, mercy or wrath, wrath, wrath. But he is holy, holy, holy, the ONLY attribute of God is repeated 3 times.

In my High-school yearbook, they would do "Senior Superlatives" like "most likely to succeed" or "class clown." The idea was the person of that class that most represented that quality. One scholar writes that it is "as if to say the divine holiness is so far beyond anything the human mind can grasp that a 'super-superlative' has to be invented to express it and, furthermore, that this transcendent holiness is the total truth about God."

Remember that God's attributes are identical with his being. His holiness is thus united to his love, justice, power, etc. Thus every aspect of God's being is holy. His love is holy love. His Justice is holy justice. His mercy is holy mercy. His name is holy. His promises are holy.

This absolute holiness sets him apart from all else in creation. God is holy in his essence, his very substance whereas creatures are holy by relation to God. We are not inherently holy. We must be made holy. "Holiness, Charnock writes, is a glorious perfection belonging to the nature of God. Thus the difference between the God's holiness and the holiness of the seraphim who flew around him in his presence never ceasing to praise the holy God. Though they had never sinned they by design cover their feet and their eyes for while they were created holy and remain holy, their Lord is uncreated holy, eternally holy, absolutely holy.

God is comprehensively holy

What I mean here is that holiness is adopted as a comprehensive descriptor for God. Indeed his favorite name for himself in the OT is "The Holy One of Israel" He is the Holy one living in the midst of his people. The holiness of God is a comprehensive statement of his relation to all creation. He is the holy God. And holiness in its definition does mean "to separate" and thus God is the being which stands in an absolutely unique relation to all creation. The Isaiah passage highlights this in that the three-fold holiness of God is expressed in the glory of God filling the earth. Thus God's glory can be defined as the manifestation of his holiness. Another wrote that "Holiness is the Lord's hidden glory; glory is the Lord's omnipresent holiness."

God is morally holy

There is absolutely no evil in him. This is where we find the Bible speaking of God as light. *1 John 1:5* "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." There is no evil in God. Even as he orders the world including the evil that is in it, there is no evil in him. He has no inner demons or tragic vices. He cannot be tempted, he is never in doubt of himself. He is never double-minded or confused. He is not a flawed hero just doing his best. There is no best or worst in God just as there is no effort or exertion. He wills and it is done. He is perfectly good.

Psa. 34:8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

Psa. 86:5 For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.

Psa. 100:5 For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

The last verse there "The Lord is Good" is expressed in his steadfast love abounding to his people forever. That wasn't just a high on the Israelite music charts. It was a theological reality they sang in blessing and plenty as well as in exile and suffering. His goodness was not diminished by the circumstances of his people, rather he was exalted for he continued to bless, protect and eventually restore them. For God to be Holy means he is completely devoid of any evil and he perfectly, absolutely good. This is a challenge for us as our doctrine of God meets our experience. For if God is sovereign and we experience evil, then how can he be good? There are many who challenge us in the faith who argue that, in fact, God is not good. But the moral perfection of God is not compromised by the challenges we face or the evil of men. Further, if God is not perfectly, absolutely good then he would not be God. Charnock argues that we can attribute other attributes to God, but if we deny his holiness "we make him but an infinite monster, and sully all those perfections we ascribed to him before; we rather own him a devil than a God." God has in himself absolute moral perfection. No mistakes. No wrongs committed. No, "Well it was a good idea at the time..." He is absolutely, comprehensively and morally Holy.

Stephen Charnock summarizes God's holiness:

"The holiness of God is his glory, as his grace is his riches: holiness is his crown, and his mercy is his treasure. This is the blessedness and nobleness of his nature; it renders him glorious in himself, and glorious to his creatures, that understand anything of his lovely perfection. Holiness is a glorious perfection belonging to the nature of God."

This is certainly wondrous to consider, but we must not leave yet. For God is holy we have said. And the scriptures also teach us that-

God makes his people holy

We are called to be holy because God is holy

1 Peter 1:14-16 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Quoting from the Law in Lev. 11:44 Peter says that the conduct of God's people who have been redeemed is based upon the character of their God. He is Holy and thus our conduct must be holy. What then is holy conduct? The habit of being of one mind with God, endeavor to shun every known sin, and to keep every known commandment, strive to be like our Lord Jesus

We also need holy character. In his book on holiness J.C. Ryle defines this as: holiness meekness, longsuffering, gentleness, patience, kind tempers, control of the tongue, moderation and self-denial, charity and brotherly kindness, a spirit of mercy and benevolence toward others, purity of heart, fear of God, humility, faithfulness in all the duties and relations in life, spiritual-mindedness. That all! Now we might be tempted to end there, but if you are like me then you hear that list and become a bit crestfallen. In bad moments we are tempted to despair.

We are required to be holy, but we can't be - Is. 6:5

Heb. 12:14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

We have here a problem. If we are God's people then our conduct is to be holy, but how can we do that unless we ourselves are holy? But how does that which is unholy become holy? The answer is that we cannot do it. We can no more make ourselves holy than a pot could make itself holy in the tabernacle. We are like Isaiah in his encounter with the living God on the throne. Our response in the presence of the Holy One is not now of worship but woe. Not one of praise, but terror.

Isaiah 6:5 The prophet cries out "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 LORD of hosts!"

That word lost means to cut off or destroy. Isaiah is saying that he is ruined, destroyed, undone in the sight of the thrice-holy God. Why? Because he has unclean lips and he lives among a people of unclean lips. God is perfectly holy and all that is unholy will be burned away in the great fire of his judgment. What can the prophet do? What can we do? The answer is nothing.

Thankfully-

In Christ God has made a holy people for himself - Is. 6:6-7

According to Herman Bavinck, to be holy several things must happen: we must be chosen and set apart by God, divested of (have removed) our common character by special ceremonies, receive a new character live in this new condition in accordance with the laws prescribed for it. Holiness is more than separation. It is to remove its common character and “impress upon it another stamp, a stamp uniquely its own, which it must bear and display everywhere.” Thus we see in Isaiah 6:6-7 the answer to Isaiah’s problem is not what he can do, but what God does.

Is. 6:6-7 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.”

My friends, is not this the gospel? Were we not chosen by God before the foundation of the world, predestined for adoption as sons and daughters? Do we not come to Jesus because the Father has given us to him prior to our coming? Do we not love him, because he first loved us? Did his blood, shed for you not remove the common character of sin, did not his blood cleanse your very soul of the stains and defilements of sin, all that which made you unholy and unacceptable to God? Did the Father not clothe you with the righteousness of his son such that he looks upon you with delight and considers you righteous and pure in his sight? Has he not given you his Spirit setting you apart, progressively sanctifying you, increasing your personal holiness as we war against sin and the devil? We are a holy people, not by our works, but by faith. We are declared holy, set apart by God and we are being made holy until we come into his presence.

CONCLUSION

Holiness is not superstitious nonsense about what we can touch or taste. Holiness we see is at the heart of the very gospel which redeems. Our God is absolutely, comprehensively and morally holy. And his people must be holy. By the blood of Jesus God makes his people Holy. Let us then praise him, cast off manner of evil and seek his righteousness and kingdom.

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