God is... Holy

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Date: 08 November 2026

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[0:00] Please turn in your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah chapter 6, which is on page 571 in the Black Bibles.

The differences between Islam and Christianity. They weren't heated, they were friendly conversations, they were good. Next time we do it, I really encourage you to come.
But what is God? Or who is God? It struck me again that when you ask that question of a Muslim, it is very, very clear that Allah and the God of the Bible are not the same.
We mustn't fall into the trap of thinking, well, there's one God and there's just different expressions of him. And that's one of the reasons why we're doing this series on Sunday mornings.
We want to really be clear about who God is, who the God we believe in, who the God we trust in. Scripture says those who know their God will do great exploits.
[1:21] And so look with me just at your service sheet, at the question again, what is God? Well, God is a spirit. God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

Today we come to holiness, which is really in many ways, I think, the essential element of God's character. You might have noticed in the reading in Isaiah chapter 6, if you look there, that there's a vision that the prophet is given.
And it begins with a vision of God on his throne, ruling and reigning in the year that King Uzziah died. In the year that King Uzziah died, he said, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.
It's the middle of the 8th century BC, when Isaiah had this experience. Why does it tell you in the year that King Uzziah died? Surely we don't need that information.
It grounds it in history, but why? Why tell us that? Because it's a time that is full of change and full of unrest. It's most likely a time quite parallel to our generation.
[2:37] Isaiah the prophet is doubtlessly deeply aware that a king who'd been stable for so long has died. King Uzziah started well, but died in disgrace.

He died a leper. He died in many ways under the judgment of God. And Isaiah the prophet wants you and I to know that he is deeply aware of the transientness, the temporary nature of human rule, of the flimsy nature of human authority, of the unreliability of human figures in every sense.
And here in the midst of this situation, there was nothing that Isaiah and the people of God needed so much as a vision of God on his exalted throne.
The throne of Judah was empty, but Isaiah is being taught that the throne of God is occupied. And that God remains eternally the one who is exalted on his throne.
He is high and lifted up. The constant fact in all the movement of history is that the Lord Omnipotent reigns. And it's at this point that Isaiah is given, Isaiah is given a vision of God's sovereign reign in glory, who sits on the throne.
[4:03] So I want to ask us a few questions of this passage. First of all, who is he? Who is this God? And the answer comes, he is the one who is infinitely holy, who is infinitely high.

He is the holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty. If you look at the passage with me, you'll see that in this passage, God's throne is surrounded by seraphim.
Seraphs appear really rarely in scripture. Cherubim are often around, but these are angelic creatures. The root meaning of the word seraph is this idea of a burning one.
So these seraphs are like flaming creatures. They, in a sense, reflect the flaming glory that's around the throne of God in his infinite holiness.
And they are crying to one another. They are responsibly chanting to one another about him who is sitting on the throne. And what they are absorbed in is God's holiness.

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[5:13] Can you see it? Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

They chant it to one another. Now let me explain what they're saying and how they're saying it. The Hebrew language has no word for very. Nor does it have a form of speech that has superlatives. greatest, greatest, loveliest, purest, or whatever. It doesn't have that. But what it does do is it repeats the word for emphasis.

And so you discover, don't you, when you come into the New Testament that Jesus, when he wants to emphasize something, when he wants to say that there's something very important, he says, truly, truly, I say to you. So you find repetition is the way of emphasizing something.

It's the way of intensifying something. There's no bold font. There's no italics. There's no underlining. They repeat the word. But nowhere in all the Bible is there a characteristic of God that's repeated three times apart from his holiness.

[6:27] And so it's intensified again and again and again. Threefold holiness. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. And that's what the seraphim are saying.

There's an intense holiness to the character of God which language can barely describe. It's the same language in heaven where we read in Revelation 4, verse 8, where they rest not in the day or the night and they say, holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which is and was and is to come.

And so even the threefold repetition of the holiness of God is saying to you and I, this is tremendously important. That's why I say we are presented here with the very essence of the character of God.

Somebody said, it's not so much that God is holy, but that holiness is God. This is God's very nature and character. Whatever else God is, above all else, he is the Holy One.

In fact, the commonest name for God in the Bible, do you know what it is, that appears more frequently than all the others put together is this, that he is the Holy One. The Holy One of Israel in our midst.

[7:54] Now, what does the word mean? What is it saying to us about God? What does holiness mean? There's two ideas. The first idea is that of separation, of being separate.

That's the root idea of the word. Sometimes people have suggested it's to cut, to set apart. It speaks of distinctiveness. It speaks, therefore, of God in his distinctiveness.

But it's used in various ways in the Bible. So the first time it's used in the Bible is of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath day is to be set apart.

It is to be put aside for God. And so things are described in the Bible as set apart. They're set apart for God. There are holy places where God is to be met there.

There's holy ground because God is standing there. There are holy things because those things are used for God. And the word holy means to be set apart, to be put aside, to be different.

[8:59] It also means he is exalted above all else in the universe. God is, as it were, on a plane, utterly by himself. He is set apart from men and women, from his creation, in his intense and glorious holiness.

He is apart from us in his purity and righteousness and majesty and beauty. So the holiness of God makes him distinct from us. And above all else, it makes him distinct from all that is impure, unrighteous, and untrue.

God is lifted above this. The Bible says God's eyes are so pure that he cannot even behold iniquity. The Lord is separated from all that is impure.

So we discover that God is the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, which is a description, isn't it, of his separateness.

So think of Moses at the burning bush. And he begins to approach God. He begins to draw near. But then the voice comes from the burning bush, doesn't it?

[10:10] Do not draw near. Why? Because the place where you're standing, Moses, is holy ground. Take off your shoes. It's not holy ground because it's been set apart or consecrated by men.

It's holy ground because God is there and God cannot be approached by sinful men and women. You ought to stand back, says the voice. You ought to stand back from the bush because God is separate.

In his holiness, he has exalted his holiness. And that is what exalts God to an infinite height and glory. But there's another meaning to the word.

It means not only separate and cut off, but it means a shining or a breaking forth or a burning.

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God's holiness is like an outbreak. You can almost see it here in the experience of Isaiah. Isaiah experienced an outbreak of burning, shining, light, and glory.
[11:18] God's holiness is a blinding, fiery burning which causes even the very seraphim who are themselves burning, fiery creatures to veil their eyes and cover their faces and they cannot look at it.

It's this kind of thing we experience with the sun and its brightness, isn't it? The sun burns. We can't look at it. So we shade ourselves. We cover our eyes from it. But here are unfallen creatures, seraphim, who never sinned and yet they cover their faces.
It's the outshining of this infinite burning glory of God. we're talking about something this morning that we have very little equipment to be able to understand with.
There's two things I think that we see from this fact that he's holy. First, that he is the high and exalted one that he's separate from his creation and he's separated from all that is sinful and all that is impure and all that is unrighteous and all that is in true.
He's the Lord that sits exalted. He sits upon his throne, the high and lofty one. And the other thing that speaks to us is of the moral perfection of God.
[12:38] And that, of course, affects all our thinking about God because God is not like one of us. God is not a man. He's not a woman.

He is exalted in his infinite holiness and glory. But we also learn a great deal about God from this burning, shining glory.
It speaks of his moral perfection. That means that you see that God's nature, who God is, is perfect, burning purity. The Bible describes it in various forms.
And you can almost see that the language is grasping at what is ungraspable. Think of those words from the New Testament. God is light and in him is no darkness at all.
And that's why again and again there's almost this outbreak of this glorious holiness of God upon men and women. It happens in the Garden of Eden, doesn't it?
[13:45] Right? At the start, Adam and Eve fall into sin. They rebel. They say, God, we do not want you in our lives. And so they are cast out of the Garden of Eden. And do you remember how they're barred from the Garden of Eden?

There is a great flaming sword, an outbursting of the holiness of God, a great flaming sword that is put on the edge of the garden to keep, to guard the way to the tree of life.
They are not to come near, you see. You find the same thing in the mountain when it comes to Moses when he's given the Ten Commandments. The holy law of God and there is that burning, fiery experience that he saw.
Mount Sinai was surrounded by God's flaming holiness. And the law is a reflection of God's holiness. His moral perfection and the flaming glory that surrounded Mount Sinai as Israel was gathered at the bottom of it was God's flaming glory.
You find the same thing in the tabernacle. The true God is present in his glory in the midst of his people and right at the heart of the tabernacle is the Holy of Holies. A holy place.
[14:58] And no one can dare enter that Holy of Holies except the high priest once a year. And the reason for that is not some formal exclusion, not some kind of religious observance.

No, that place was called and note the repetition again, the Holy of Holies. God was there. Now when we come to experience something of what Isaiah has seen of the holiness of God, we need to ask what did it do for Isaiah and what should it do for us?
What did it do for Isaiah and what should it do for us? Well, the first thing it did for Isaiah is this. It showed him the true nature of sin.
Isaiah 6 is not a vision of sin, of rebellion, of iniquity, of going our own way. No, Isaiah 6 is a vision of God.
A vision of God in his infinite holiness. With God who filled the temple, it was God's train that covered it all. It was from God that everything was being done.
[16:17] But will you notice that this vision of God in his majestic holiness, in his blinding purity, what was the effect that it had on Isaiah?

And it not only had an effect on Isaiah, it had an effect on the very foundations of the temple. the whole ground seems to heave beneath him like an earthquake.
The very earth is trembling before the awesome nature of God's holiness. Verse 4, we're told that the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called.

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That is the very calling of the name of God in his holiness. The very chant of the seraphim caused the whole earth to heave and tremble.
And what was causing them to even tremble? It was the reality of the holiness of God that caused them. And as for Isaiah, personally, all he can do is just cry out, because he recognises he's in the presence of God.
[17:29] What does he cry? Can you see it? He says, verse 5, woe is me, quite literally, I'm ruined. Another way of translating it is I'm undone.

I'm found out. What it really means is I'm without hope. Disaster has come upon me. That's what he's saying.
I'm finished. I'm done for. And there's no possibility of any hope. There's no light in this darkness. There's such glorious light around the throne of God.
But for Isaiah, he says, I'm ruined. I'm in utter consternation. I'm in despair. And there's one overwhelming reason for this great distress and deep conviction of sin.
And that is that he's suddenly seen not just sin in general, but he's seen his own sin in the presence of a holy God. And that is the crucial thing.
[18:41] Verse 5, woe is me, me, for I'm lost. I'm nowhere. I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

And if you think, well, he's just a little bit exaggerating, it seems a little bit silly, isn't it? He's obviously said some things he shouldn't. It's connected with unclean lips.
We might think, of course, I've said some things I shouldn't say. There have been some words on my lips that I'm a bit ashamed of. But you see, to Isaiah, this represents, doesn't it, something of the reality of what sin has done.
Jesus says it's out of the heart the mouth speaks. And Isaiah has recognized something about his heart. he recognizes that he's not lived with God as Lord.
He realizes he's not given God the glory that he's due. He may be speaking about his inability to worship God, which is why he was created in the first place.
[20:07] It may be that he's speaking as a preacher and he's saying how sinful he's been with his lips. It's more likely to be the defilement of his heart.

Whatever it is, he sees his sin in the light of the holiness of God and he says, I'm ruined. Oswald Sanders wrote these words about the Puritans.
We often read of the Puritans, those 17th century men that wrote so much on the Christian life and they mourned greatly over their sin. They're often portrayed as miserable killjoys, but they mourned over their sin.
This is what Sanders wrote, he said this, we can only conclude that either they were very wicked men or we are very superficial Christians. It's worth thinking about, isn't it?
They were either very wicked men or we are very superficial Christians. Christians. It really does have everything to do with seeing something of the holy character and the immense purity of God.
[21:17] Do you know the story of the hunchback of Notre Dame? The pathetic figure, Quasimodo, the bells, the bells, you know that? He says to the girl that he's taken away, he takes her up to the tower of Notre Dame, and when he looks upon her, and he's a pretty ugly beast really, he's an ugly bearing, and he says, when I look upon her, he says, I never knew how ugly I was.

Her beauty shows him how ugly he is. Until I saw how beautiful you are, I never knew how ugly I was. And it's something the same with God.
We will not see how sinful we are until we see the glory and the holiness of God. God. That's the first thing that the holiness of God does.
The second thing that the holiness of God does for Isaiah needs to do for us is discover, show us the true nature of grace. You see that in verse 6 and 7? Isaiah experienced the grace of God.
It brought him cleansing and the removal from his guilt. Just look with me at these words at the end of verse 7. They are amazing, aren't they? Your guilt is taken away, your sin atoned for.
[22:41] Beautiful, beautiful words. Some of you are crying out for that this morning. You're crying out to hear those words from God. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.

All the focus moves to the altar in the passage. The seraphim, covered face, covered feet, and flapping wings, flies to the altar where there's burning coals.
The altar was the place where there was our sin dealt with as the people of God. The sins of men laid on the altar and offered up in the place of the one who is guilty.

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And so our guilt can be taken, our defilement and our foulness, and the judgment of God falls on the altar. And so the seraphim comes to Isaiah and say, this has touched your lips and your guilt is taken away, your sin is dealt with.
Can you see the beauty of this picture? That God has provided a way for Isaiah to be forgiven and to be cleansed and for his guilt to be taken away.
[23:52] It is, isn't it, a token of God's grace? A God who is infinitely holy is prepared to deal with sinners like you and I who are so infinitely defiled.

And one of these mysterious things in the whole experience of Isaiah, it's almost as mysterious as this experience of his holiness. God brings him pardon and cleansing and freedom and power.
And so God is infinitely holy but he's also infinitely gracious. And when we understand the holiness of God and who he is and what he's like and we understand what he's done, we will sing amazing grace.
The reason why grace is not amazing for so many of us is we have failed to grasp how holy God is.
That's a French cynic, isn't it, word of proverb, God will forgive, that's his business.
That's how lots of people live. And actually, let's face it, that is often the language of our hearts, isn't it? God will forgive us, that's his business. But grace, God's kindness, God's undeserved kindness, will never become truly amazing to us until we've been where Isaiah is and caught a vision of his holiness.
[25:17] Isaiah saw the true nature of sin, the true nature of grace, but also the true nature of worship. There's several insights, I think, into the nature of worship here. First, you notice how the unfallen, the unsinful seraphim, how they behave in the presence of God's holiness.

They're not fallen creation, they've got nothing to be ashamed of. love. You can understand unfallen human beings bowing down prostrate before the holy God, saying the Lord is in his holy temple, let all keep silence before him.
But here are unfallen seraphim. they live in the presence of God, they've never committed any sin, and yet the holiness of God is so bright that they cover their eyes and they cover their feet.
There's a sense, isn't it, which we're given these seraphim, they're unable to bear the outshining of God's glory and holiness. us. And yet, in their unfallenness, they bow before him because they've grasped something of his holiness and his burning glory.
And so shouldn't that characterize us? That as we come to worship, we prostrate ourselves in his presence, we come with reverence and with godly fear.
[26:58] And when we lose that, that reverence and godly fear, it is because we've lost sight of who God really is. But notice, along with this humbling of themselves, it is God that they're exalting.

There's those two elements in their worship, the humbling of ourselves and the exalting of God.
They cry, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.
The whole earth is full of his glory. That's what they're chanting about to one another. The center of their vision and the center of our vision must be this God who is exalted in his holiness and glory.
The whole earth is full of his glory and we are bowed down before him as his people. like Elijah. Do you remember he bowed down with his head between his knees and his face to the ground.
What's the point there? He cannot get any lower. And that is the picture of a man who's worshipping that God may be exalted. That he may be abased so that God might be exalted.
[28:06] the two remaining wings of these seraphim are employed to do his bidding. That's how worship expresses itself. Here's the last thing.

The true nature of holiness must also lead us to understand godliness. It must understand our sin. It will make us understand the wonder of grace. It will make us understand worship that we are to humble ourselves and exalt God. But lastly, his holiness teaches us the true nature of godliness.
It begins with grace, doesn't it? His lips are touched by the live coal. Isaiah is being fitted to be a servant of God. He's being prepared for a lifetime of ministry. The purpose of God is very clear.
And there are some elements of God's character. character, which we share. And there's some elements of God's character which we will never share. So his omnipotence, he's all powerful, isn't it?
[29:15] He can do anything he wants. We'll never share in that. He's omnipresent. He knows everything. We'll never know everything. But the holiness of God, he shares with us.

God, he means us to share. The apostle Peter says in his letter, these brave words, he says, we are partakers in his holiness.

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God says again and again in the Bible, be holy, for I am holy. His holiness is a separation and a burning with God's glory.
And God's people are a holy people, a holy nation. They are separate from the world and they shine out with God's holiness and God's beauty.
And that is what God intends the world to see. God intends the communities in which we live in, the people we work amongst, that they might see something of his holiness in us.
[30:19] They don't look at the Bible. They have a world without a Bible. They'll never come to know him unless he is seen in you. And so what kind of God should we portray to the world?

I don't know how sermons on the holiness of God make you feel. It's probably not a great question to ask. There is a sense in which they should humble us. There is a real sense, isn't it, which in Isaiah we should feel that woe is me, I'm undone, and wonder at God's grace, bow down ourselves before him, and exalt him in worship.
And it should fill us with a desire to show the world God's holiness. But as I finish, I want to talk about how the apostle John takes Isaiah 6.
Because in John 12, verse 41, Isaiah said these things, speaking about Isaiah 6, because he saw his glory and spoke of him.
John tells us, who did Isaiah see? John tells us that Isaiah saw the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus sitting high and lifted up.
[31:35] And the angels crying of our Saviour, he is holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty. And he is surrounded by the seraphim.

Can you imagine how those angels felt, those seraphim? How astonished they must have been when the king of the angels got off his throne and entered into the womb of a virgin Mary.
Can you imagine how astonished they must have been to see the one who is the king of the angels, the one who is holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty, the king of glory who flung stars into space, become a tiny little cluster of cells in the womb of the virgin Mary.
No bigger than the dot of an eye. Luke, as he describes that baby in Mary's womb, do you remember how he describes it? He calls it a holy thing.
That fetus in the Virgin Mary, the size of an eye, a dot on an eye, and he describes it as a holy thing.
[32:47] Lord God Almighty, the Lord God Almighty, the Lord God makes under the law. And then you look at his life in obscurity and poverty and humility and lowliness and his friendship with sinners and his poor repetition amongst the religious elite and you remind yourself that he is holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.

And then you see him by the side of a shore and he calls out to Simon Peter. Simon Peter's been fishing all night and Jesus calls out to him and says take your nets that have been on one side of the boat and put them on the other side of the boat.
And Peter says I've been a fisherman for decades and who are you to tell me what to do but I'll do it takes the empty net from one side of the boat and he puts it on the other side of the boat and there is this enormous catch of fish that they can't even bring into shore.
And Simon Peter recognizes who that stranger on the shore is and he cries out do you remember depart from me for I'm a sinful man. Woe is me I'm undone Isaiah 6.
That language. The Lord Jesus gives holiness a face and it's in him that you hear the words that we've already heard today your guilt is taken away your sin is atoned for and so it's as we trust in him and it is through him and as we are united to him that we live out that great command of the scriptures be holy as I am holy.
[34:37] And the truth is this you cannot do that on your own. You cannot do that in your own strength you mustn't grit your teeth and think I'm going to be more holy today. We can only do this in Christ through Christ and with Christ.

And so see in the light of God's holiness the reality of your sin the wonder of grace the privilege of worship that we have to humble ourselves and exalt God and hear Jesus say to you today be holy as I am holy.
Let's pray together. Let's pray

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