

“Holy and Awesome” // Ex 34:6–7; Isaiah 6:1–9 // *The Name #2*

College students stand...

We’re in week 2 of a series called “The Name.” **You have a name;** that name is important to you—you and I are never going to get that close if you don’t ever learn my name or you call me wrong name; **God has a name;** and understanding that name is crucial to knowing him.

For most people, God is a mystery. Some people aren’t sure if he exists, or if he does, how you could know; others believe in him—they know **it can’t be that nothing x nobody** means equals everything—but when I talk about having a relationship with him they are confused. And there are a lot of people like I used to be—you know that you are supposed to say you have a relationship with God, but you are confused as to why they don’t seem to feel any emotion or affection for God.

All these issues are addressed through knowing the name of God.

Exodus 34 is the place we’re working from, where God declares his name to Moses, and this weekend I want to talk about the holiness of his name. **You are going to see his holiness** all through this passage...

- **“Holiness” is the most commonly used descriptive word about God** by Moses... In Exodus and Leviticus alone it is used more than 124x.

Holiness is one of those words that most Americans find bland and unattractive. They think of it was some kind of bright, white, colorless

light. Or they think it means **“weirdly religious.”** if you say, “so and so is so holy,” that’s not usually a compliment.

But **holiness just means perfection.**

- Our word **“holiness” in English** comes from the **root word** “whole” like “wholeness;” it is the essence of goodness.
 - It is something that, I’ll show you, that **you yearn for** whether or not you’ve known what to call it.
- We want holiness in our relationships
 - Nobody wants a **spouse** that is unfaithful, or a **boyfriend** who lies, or a **friend** who exploits us...
 - We want **holiness in our business** dealings. No one wants to work for example, with a contractor that shows up late, does shoddy work, and overcharges us.

Let me show you... EXODUS 34 (Real quick: I **always use multiple sources** when I prepare messages, and you can access those in the transcript I put up on my blog each weekend... but for these concepts this weekend, I am **particular indebted to Tim Keller.**¹ Keller serves as somewhat of a theological mentor for me... my Yoda, he is. **KELLER AND JD**

Ch 33, when Moses said, “Let me see your glory.” *¹⁹ And (God) said, “I will make all my **goodness** pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The Lord.’ ...²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live...”

- Isn’t it **ironic that when God makes his goodness** pass before Moses, that is **goodness is so good** that it could kill Moses?

Then God tells Moses to take the 10 Commandments and hold them in his hands—which represent the moral expression of his goodness (TRUTH, JUSTICE, PURITY)—and then he puts Moses in a cleft in the rock and covers him with his hand, so he doesn’t die—and then...

¹ See for example, his sermon by Tim Keller on Isaiah 6, “God’s Holiness,” preached at Redeemer Presbyterian in NYC.

*34:5 The Lord *descended in the cloud* and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

- The Lord *descends*; he is high and glorious and above the earth
- He is in a *cloud*: Even though he comes close he is still mysterious. The cloud means he is still hidden. You can't see his shape.

Let's leave Exodus and go to another place in the Bible, where we get an even more in-depth look at God's holiness... **Isaiah 6**. (Actual paper Bible?) BRING ONE! (Angry birds)

***Isaiah 6:1**, In the year that King Uzziah died... (Stop there... Let's talk about who Uzziah was. Uzziah was a beloved king who had reigned for **52 years**. And he had led well, pleasing God, right up to the very end... when his pride got the best of him. He got cocky and one day he decided that he didn't need the priests to offer sacrifices, he could do it himself. It was a flagrant violation of the laws God had set up for his Temple, and the priests come in to stop him and he points at them and says, "Back off, or I'll kill you!" And at just that moment leprosy broke out on his forehead and ate its way all the way down his body. He dies shortly thereafter.)

Well, as you can imagine, this leaves the people in **utter dismay**. Their leader—who has led them for half a century—has just been struck down by God! The very foundations of the nation have been shaken!

In that year... I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, (*Uzziah has fallen from his throne, but God is still on his*) high and lifted up (*Uzziah had tried to lift himself up; God was truly exalted*); 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.

- The angels, the burning ones... whenever a human sees an angel in Scripture... it's not a **overweight cupid** that looks like a chubby 3 year old with a toy bow and arrow. Whenever an angel appears to a human, the sight is so terrifying that the angel has to first say, "Fear not. You don't need to die!"

- These angels have 6 **wings**. Four of them are used to cover parts of the angel in worship; 2 of them are used to fly. **Some have asked**: Is that supposed to be some kind of ratio for our relationship with God? For every 1/3 of service we do, we should be doing 2/3 worship?
 - That's **probably not the main point**, but it does show you our work for God should always rise out of a heart saturated with worship of God.
 - Our **primary task** as Christians—our primary delight, is worship.

[3] And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

- The Hebrew language uses **repetition** to express superlative. For example, a deep pit is called a "pit, pit" and pure gold was called "gold, gold."
 - **The holiness of the Lord is the only instance in the Old Testament of a superlative requiring a threefold repetition**. He is pure and undefiled holiness.
- Holiness is his **most defining characteristic**. Notice, the angels do not say, "Power, power, power." Or even "Love, love, love." They say "holy, holy, holy."²

What does the word holy mean? Literally, in Hebrew, the word (kadosh) means, "set apart." Set apart... Different; distinct.

In these **two encounters** we see him set apart in at least 2 ways:

1. God is "set apart" by his awesomeness

- He is **high and lifted up**. He **dwells in clouded** mystery. The temple is filled with smoke.
- Theologians call this the "**otherness**" of God.
- Often, we **want to reduce God just a slightly bigger**, slightly stronger, slightly more intelligent version of us.

² Cf. Gen 14:10; 2 Kings 25:15. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah By the Day*, 41.

- We see that in **how we demand** he give us an explanation for his actions. “God, you better **explain yourself**; and I better see some good coming out of this... and if you don’t show me the reason for this I am going to quit believing in you or rebel against you... “
- **As if we could bring God down and put him on trial as if he were one of us.** But God is not one us—just a slob like one of us (for you children of the 90’s)—and at the end of the day we are not in position to judge him.
 - **Job...** “God, it’s not fair. What have I done? ***Are you really just in how you rule the universe?***” (*Ironically, we who read the book of Job see God’s purpose, but Job can’t see even what we see!*)
 - But God’s response is **not to explain** to Job the bigger picture... “See how this works, Job? See? That makes sense, doesn’t it?”
 - Rather, **Job 38:25**—God says, “Job, the lightning bolts report to me... do they report to you?” Surely you’d know, Job, because you’re so smart.”
 - God says, “***You want to put me on trial? Let’s take a look at the expanse of your knowledge for a second...*** I tell you what, let’s meet together to discuss this matter, and you bring your universe and I’ll bring mine and we’ll compare. Oh, what’s that, you don’t have a universe? Then maybe you’re not in a place to judge me.”
 - ***I’m not saying there is no place to question God...*** the Psalms are filled with people doing that. But God’s point is Job is that we don’t supposed we could bring God down to our level as if he had to answer to our bar of justice, as if we could **see or know** enough to bring him into judgment.
 - ***Isa 55:8-9**, “**My thoughts are not your thoughts** (not that mine are a little better; but we they don’t compare) ; **my ways are not your ways; for as the heavens are higher than the earth** (we know now

even more than Isaiah knew when he wrote that!), **so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”**

- **Don’t flatter yourself** that you could understand it all just by me explaining it to you. We are not peers.
- **The classic objection of the problem of evil...** If God is all-powerful, he could stop evil...
 - **I’ve told you... the missing premise** in that formulation: God is also all-wise. And if his wisdom is as high above ours as his power is above ours... *it makes sense that a lot of his purposes may not be immediately perceptible to me.*
 - **Illustration this weekend: At the gym where I work out... ITF. Calorie row machine... 320 Watts... Enough to light 4 light-bulbs...**
 - **The sun generates** enough energy in 1 sec to supply all US energy needs for 13 BILLION years. God just **spoke the sun into existence.** He just said, “Let there be light,” and there was.³
 - **Me rowing with all my might: 4 lightbulbs;** God in a throw-away comment creates billions of stars, each one with the capacity to generate in 1 second enough power to provide all the US energy needs for 13 billion years.
 - **My question: If God’s wisdom is as high above mine as his power is above mine, am I really in a place to hold God to account?**
 - **Imagine a 7-year-old** telling a rocket scientist, “No, no, no. That rocket is too heavy; it will not fly.” The scientist may not

³ John 6, MacArthur, True and False Disciples, T4G

stop and explain it all. He may just say, **“Um, no. Sit and watch.”** This is what God is doing to Job.

- Again, I’m not saying there’s **no place for you** to ask questions... or that God’s purposes have no rhyme or reason or that we’ll never grasp them... just that **we should approach the question with the knowledge that he is holy, and awesome, and glorious!**
- You see **just because you cannot think** of a good reason that something bad might happen doesn’t necessarily mean that there CANNOT be a good reason why it happened.
- **God is holy! He is beyond the beyond...he’s above the above.** And I know that can be difficult... because we really want to **shrink him down to our size** so we can explain him, predict him, compartmentalize him, control him... but that a God worthy of orship. It’s like **Evelyn Underhill**, British political writer of the early 20th century used to say, **“If God were small enough to be understood, he would not be big enough to be worshipped.”**

2. God is “set apart” in his moral perfections

- God is pure goodness... with no mixture of bad—he is without injustice, deceit, capriciousness, pettiness or impurity. (As I told you, these are all things we value in people; they find their ultimate expression in God...)
- His goodness is so good that it cannot tolerate evil. Goodness so good that a sinner, like Moses, can’t see it and live.
- **Habakkuk 1:13**, **“You are of such pure eyes you cannot even look at evil.”**
 - I’ve told you it is someone handing you a cup of **ice tea to drink**... with urine in it... but 98% pure!

Back to Isaiah... At the sight of his holiness... **[4] And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. [5] And I said: “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!”

God’s holiness is terrifying...

- *The **angels have their faces covered**...*
- The **pillars of the Temple**, which aren’t even *people*, are shaking with fear!
- **Isaiah**, the prophet of God—the man with the message—falls on his face and says, I am lost; I am ruined; I am undone.
- When Job—whom God called righteous—saw God, he said, “I had heard about you with my ears, but now I see you, and I abhor myself.”
- **One other place you see this: Mark 4:** (so you know it’s not just an OT thing): One of the best stories of Jesus’ life. **When Jesus calms the storm... after the rescue. “greatly afraid.”** The storm had them *afraid*, but when Jesus calmed the storm, *they were terrified. The rescue was more frightening than the trouble!*

Why is it terrifying?

Well, Just to be in the presence of greatness is terrifying. Have you ever really been in the presence of greatness?

- When I was a kid, **Michael Jordan** was my hero... In his car.
 - You feel a mixture of **fascination and fright**; simultaneously attracted and repelled.
 - German philosopher **Rudolf Otto** said that’s how you know you are worshipping something—you have a mixture of fascination and fright!
- The idea of frightening God is out of fashion today—unmodern—but you’re in the presence of human greatness you feel fear.
- How much more with God? We talk like we want a **God who is a buddy... COPILOT OR HOMEBOY**—a Precious Moments God who warms us when we are cold... and yes, Jesus is **intimate with you** and a **friend that sticks closer** than a brother...
- **But he’s holy.**

- When the **angels see him** they cover their faces; **prophets** fall down as dead men.
- Or we make little light, flippant, statements like... “*Lord, we just come down, be with us. Let your presence be here.*” But do you realize that if God just ripped off the roof and answered our prayer and we looked up at him, outside of Christ, we’d all die!

Second, God’s holiness is terrifying because it reveals our goodness to not be good

- Isaiah says, “I am unclean; I’m lost.” Ruined.
 - **KJV says**, “I’m undone!” Because the word in Hebrew implies being torn apart psychologically.
 - The “glue” that held Isaiah’s life together—his sense of goodness—is nothing before God.
- When God’s presence begins to enter your life, that’s how you always feel.
 - **The sign that you don’t know God at all is you feel pretty good about yourself.** (*This message in a culture where to become spiritual is to find your center; become good about yourself!*)
 - You see, we are **creatures of comparison**. We tend to console ourselves as people by comparing ourselves to others. “*I’m not as bad as...*” Or the assumption that God grades on the curve... everybody did really bad, so the only ones that fail are you guys that did REALLY bad,” and you assume that category is populated by the child porn people or terrorists, so you feel ok.
 - But when we see true holiness, **all that falls apart**, because we see that the standard is not one another... we see real **goodness...** and we see how sick and twisted and deformed our hearts have become.
 - **Isaiah:** When I saw you... **filthy rags**

Which leads to this last one... **Third, God’s holiness is terrifying because it reveals our strengths to be weaknesses**

- Notice **Isaiah specifically talks about his lips**, “*I am a man of unclean lips.*” For a prophet, **his lips would have been his pride and joy**—it’s how he proclaims the message (Isaiah has **been a prophet** now for 5 chapters, several years...) For Isaiah, his lips would represent his **greatest strength...** the way a pianist feels about his fingers; or how a quarterback feels about his arm, or how a scientist feels about her mind.
- But God reveals even that to be **worthless**.
 - **That’s why he feels undone.** Even his best is insufficient.
 - **Keller:** *The holiness of God doesn’t make Isaiah ashamed of his weaknesses. It makes him look at his strengths, and realize that they aren’t strengths at all.*
 - And when that happens, you’ll feel undone, because the glue that you think holds your life together is gone.
 - *The Apostle Paul had a similar experience: **Romans 7.*** Paul, as a Jewish leader, prided himself on his obedience to the 10 Commandments. Paul tells us that one day as he was studying the Law, he came to the command, “Do not covet.” And Paul realized that while he’d fastidiously kept the laws about murder and lying... his heart continually broke this one. He discontentedly longed for things he didn’t have—more fame; more power. “The Law came and I died.” It’s all **scubala**.
 - Let me ask: **What is it for you? What’s your glue?** Your bank account? Your business savvy? Your athletic ability? Your looks? Your family?
 - **George Whitefield, whose preaching spawned the Great Awakening, only had two major points in his sermons (all preachers are like that). First, repent of your sins. Makes sense. Of course. But second, repent of your strengths,** because a) you use those as a source of false-confidence that you don’t really need God and

b) because you use them to try to cover up your sins and justify yourself before God.⁴

- **What do you think will justify you before God?** What do you think holds your life together? That's the greatest source of your sin.
 - **Because that strength takes your eyes off of your hope** in God's grace and makes you rely on your strength, not his.
 - The Apostle Paul says, "**Whatever is not of faith is sin.**" Whatever good thing makes us forget we can only be saved by grace (whatever we think justifies us before God); and whatever we do that doesn't arise out of dependence on and trust in God's grace is sin... **...and our strengths, not our weaknesses** are usually where that happens.

Wherever you are weak, you will naturally depend on God. It's where you are strong that you will forget him.

TIS GRACE THAT TAUGHT MY HEART TO FEAR...

~~(THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF HOLINESS)~~

Well, at this point, this is all **feels like bad news**... But watch what happens next:

[6] Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. [7] And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Out of the darkness flies an angel with a coal from the altar, and he touches Isaiah's mouth with it.

⁴ This is my paraphrase... the (a) and (b) are mine but I think represent what Whitefield was trying to say.

- Now, you might be tempted to think of this as "**purification by fire.**" (*Burn out the impurities.*) But that's not really an OT idea... we don't see that metaphor used in that way in the OT.
- Rather, the **coal represents a fire that has already been spent.** The coal symbolizes a fire that has already burnt itself out on a substitutionary sacrifice.⁵ Coal was drenched in the blood of a lamb... DESCRIBE CEREMONY. His **justice was satisfied.**

You see, **the holiness of God is not just terrifying, it is cleansing**... God's infinite goodness means that he not only is filled with justice; he's also filled with love;

TIS GRACE THAT TAUGHT MY HEART TO FEAR...

We see, of course, even more clearly than Isaiah, because we know that Lamb pictured Jesus...

- ...and **though he is so holy** that sin cannot survive in his presence; he is **so loving** that he offers up himself in our place so that we could survive with him forever.
- **God is so righteous** that **we had** to die for our sins; but he is so loving he was **glad** to die in our place.
- **This is what it means for God to be holy.**

When Isaiah has this moment... (BTW, this was **not his salvation**: he already knew *what the altar was for... this was a renewed sense of God's grace toward him...when it became real to him.* When that coal touched Isaiah's lips, the grace of God went from intellectual theory to a felt reality!)

When he had this moment, two things happened:

First, it propels him outward... [8] And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

⁵ Motyer, 41.

- Isaiah *volunteers*... God is like a spiritual cyclone!
- Illus. My own call to missions.
 - For years... terrified of being turned away from God.
 - The nightmares continued: I began to see others under judgment.
 - “Let me go!”
 - Holy Spirit: finally you are asking the right question! *God doesn’t draft you into ministry, he steers you. (He drafts you into salvation... but ministry is something you volunteer for!)*
- **It is impossible to have a genuine experience with the grace of God and not become an evangelist for that grace. Spurgeon: “A missionary or an impostor”** because “a burning heart will soon find for itself a flaming tongue...”

Second, it gave Isaiah a ridiculous amount of confidence. Notice how God describes Isaiah’s assignment: [9] And (God) said, “Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make this people’s heart unperceptive.”⁶ (Hebrew humor: Literally, in Hebrew, a slang term, “fathead.”)

- God says, “I need a prophet who will preach to people for 30 years, and they’ll never listen.” And Isaiah says, “I can do that!”
- What gives someone that kind of confidence? The understanding that the holy God is with you and approves of you and stands by your side.
- **No one ever wrote a glowing review** of Isaiah’s ministry. No one ever came up to Isaiah and said, ‘You know, your books and sermons have really been a help to me. God’s hand is really on you.’ People thought of him as a failure. In fact, **Jewish history tells us** Isaiah’s ministry came to an end because the king put him inside a log and cut him in two.
- But Isaiah said, “**That’s ok! My God is with me.** He will never leave nor forsake me. He will supply my every need. He waits for me at the end of this journey and he will say to me, ‘Well done,

good and faithful servant.’ And **if that God is for me**, who can be against me?”

You see, the **holiness, the transcendence of God is not just scary.** It’s immensely comforting. If you know God is with you, you’ll have the **power to stand against the world**; you’ll have the ability to **live without approval**; you **won’t be so sensitive to criticism**; you’ll live every day with hope and confidence and joy.

See, some of you are where Isaiah was: Discouraged. Success is not in front of you. No one praises you.

- You need a vision—if you are doing what God says—of the transcendent God saying, “I am with you.”
- Me on college campuses: I’m not warmly received everywhere as am here... those are called **college campuses**. I can feel the hate... I see God looking down saying, “That’s J.D. He’s scared. Preaching way too long. But he’s my boy.”

Others of you are where the nation of Israel was, you’re “in the year that King Uzziah died.” The foundations of your life have been shaken: **cancer/ marriage falling apart/ lost a job.** You’re worried about what the future brings. Is everything going to fall apart? Am I going to be ok?

- You need to see that **where others fail you**... parents, a leader, a friend... ” God never will. Others may fall from their thrones, but God never will from his.

CONCLUSION:

At first we may be resistant to a high and holy God, a God set apart from us. But that’s the only kind of God worthy of worship... it’s the kind of God we crave... a God who is purity and justice and infinite love.

All your life you’ve been looking for that fount of pure goodness.

⁶ Motyer, 42.

That God is Jesus.

You see, Isaiah uses the phrase “high and lifted up” one other time in Scripture... in the preamble to Isa 53, his description of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Jesus had an experience similar to Isaiah. Jesus came face to face with God... and though his lips were pure, he reached down and wrapped himself **in our lepers’ rags**. But no angel came with a coal to cleanse his lips... because he was the Lamb who was given to die on that altar. Instead of *feeling* like he would be torn apart, he was literally torn to shreds on our behalf. What Isaiah feared and deserved—death—he never got. Jesus got it in his place—and in ours.

The cross reveals the holiness of God, that OUR SIN IS SO BAD... we had to die; God is so loving he was glad to die in our place.

You want to know God? The only way you can know God is through Jesus. He was given as a substitutionary sacrifice for your sins, paying your penalty and absorbing the curse for your sins in your place. But he **won’t force** it on you. You have to **receive him through repentance and faith...**