

S T U D Y G U I D E

The Holiness of God

R.C. Sproul



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421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

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The Trauma of Holiness

An encounter with the holiness of God is always a traumatic experience. The Scriptures record events when men were allowed to see something of the holiness of God. Their response was always despair because they were forced to see their own sinfulness. This experience is positive, however, because it helps us to understand more adequately who God is, and to realize that our standing before Him is based on His grace rather than our merit.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To *study* the uniform witness of Scripture for the results of a personal encounter with the holiness of God.
2. To *understand* why Dr. Sproul uses the expression “the trauma of holiness.”
3. To *realize* that this trauma has positive life-changing effects.

QUOTATIONS

No attribute of God is more dreadful to sinners than His holiness.

—Matthew Henry

I am convinced that the first step toward attaining a higher standard of holiness is to realize more fully the amazing sinfulness of sin.

—J.C. Ryle

We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing.

—A.W. Tozer

An ineffably holy God, who has the utmost abhorrence of all sin, was never invented by any of Adam’s fallen descendants.

—A.W. Pink

God would not rub so hard if it were not to fetch out the dirt that is ingrained in our natures. God loves purity so well He had rather see a hole than a spot in His child's garments.

—William Gurnall

LECTURE OUTLINE

- I. The holiness of God is traumatic to unholy people
 1. Calvin noticed that there is a pattern in Scripture of human responses to the presence of God.
 - a. The more a person is described as righteous, the more he trembles when he enters the immediate presence of God.
 - b. We see this, for example, in the experiences of Habakkuk and Job.
 2. Isaiah's response to the vision of God's holiness.
 - a. Isaiah was a man of extraordinary righteousness.
 - b. Isaiah responded to the vision by crying out in terror, "Woe is me, for I am undone."

- II. The oracle of doom — "Woe is me"
 1. The concept of the oracle
 - a. Even as the priest's task is to speak to God on behalf of the people, the task of the prophet was to speak to the people on behalf of God.
 - b. The oracle was a summation of God's message to the people.
 3. The two forms of an oracle
 - a. The *oracle of weal* was an announcement of divine favor.
 - i. The formula is "Blessed..."
 - ii. Examples are the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5).
 - b. The *oracle of doom* was a pronouncing of judgment.
 - i. The formula is "Woe..."
 - ii. An example is "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees..." (Matthew 23:13).

- III. The object of the oracle of doom
 1. Isaiah pronounces judgment upon himself.
 - a. When he finds out who God is, he sees more clearly who he is.
 - b. He describes his condition as being *undone*.
 - i. He experiences *disintegration* when he sees God.
 - ii. All illusions of righteousness vanish in the presence of holiness.
 - iii. We will be judged by the standard of God's perfection.
 3. Isaiah is acutely aware of his dirty mouth.

IV. God's response to Isaiah's reaction

1. A hot coal is placed on Isaiah's lips.
 - a. In this painful process, God cauterized the wound and healed him.
 - b. His guilt was removed and his sin forgiven.
2. This is based upon Isaiah's repentance.
 - a. True repentance is always a painful process.
 - b. Our only justification as servants of God is our experience of the forgiveness of God.

BIBLE STUDY

1. In his lecture, Dr. Sproul referred to a quote from John Calvin in which Calvin said:

Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.

In his lecture, Dr. Sproul described Isaiah's encounter with the holiness of God. Listed below are Scriptures which described other people's encounters with God. Describe how they encountered the holiness of God and what their response was.

Exodus 3:6 _____
 Judges 13:20-22 _____
 Ezekiel 1:26-28 _____
 Matthew 17:6-7 _____
 Luke 5:1-8 _____
 Revelation 1:12-17 _____

- a. How would you summarize the response of these individuals?

- b. What was God doing in the Isaiah 6 passage that caused Isaiah's psychological disintegration?

c. What was God doing in the other passages that caused these responses?

d. Why, then, did the various people respond to the presence of God as they did?

e. We usually associate the emotion of fear with hostility. In the absence of any anger or wrath on the part of God, how do you account for the people's responses?

2. Dr. Sproul referred briefly in his message to Job's encounter with the presence of God as recorded in Job 42:1-6. Job's encounter was different from the others in that he initiated it by his controversy with God (Job 31:35-37).

a. Study Job 42:1-6. While Isaiah said, "Woe is me," Job said, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." How do you react to the response of Isaiah and Job? Were they exaggerating? Have you ever described yourself in such terms? If so, what prompted you to do so?

b. The apostle Paul described himself as the foremost of all sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). Do you think he really felt that way, or was he simply using hyperbole to make a point?

c. Job and Isaiah arrived at their point of disintegration before God as a result of a sudden traumatic encounter. Paul apparently arrived at this self-assessment over a period of time (see his progressive description of himself in 1 Corinthians 15:9, Ephesians 3:8, and 1 Timothy 1:15). What does this say to us about God's ways of dealing with people? Can you identify with either type of experience?

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- d. Should every Christian expect to experience over the course of his or her life either a sudden or growing awareness of personal sinfulness? Why?

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- e. Consider the parable Jesus told to Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50). What should be the response of an increased awareness of one's sin?

3. In his book Dr. Sproul states:

The holy God is also a God of grace. He refused to allow his servant to continue on his belly without comfort. He took immediate steps to cleanse the man and restore his soul...In this divine act of cleansing Isaiah experienced a forgiveness that went beyond the purification of his lips. He was cleansed throughout, forgiven to the core, but not without the awful pain of repentance.

- a. Consider Job 42:7–17 and Isaiah 6:6–8. What do these passages teach about God's forgiveness?

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- b. The result of Job's restoration is well-known in terms of the restoration of family and possessions. But what does the passage teach about the restoration of Job's relationship with God?
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c. What was the result in Isaiah's life after experiencing God's forgiveness?

d. Considering the experiences of Job and Isaiah, what would we expect to happen to someone today who deeply experiences the forgiveness of God?

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Isaiah's response to holiness was traumatic and painful. Most people tend to envision spiritual experiences as profoundly pleasant, quite unlike this episode. Why do you think most people expect encounters with God to be pleasant rather than traumatic?

2. In *The Holiness of God*, Dr. Sproul states:

To be undone means to come apart at the seams, to be unraveled. What Isaiah was expressing is what modern psychologists describe as the experience of personal disintegration. To disintegrate means exactly what the word suggests, *dis integrate*. To integrate something is to put pieces together in a unified whole. When schools are integrated, children from two different races are placed together to form one student body. The word *integrity* comes from this root, suggesting a person whose life is whole or wholesome. In modern slang, we say, "He's got it all together."

If ever there was a man of integrity it was Isaiah Ben Amoz. He was a whole man, a together type of fellow. He was considered by his contemporaries as the most righteous man in the nation. He was respected as a paragon of virtue. Then he caught one sudden glimpse of a holy God. In that single moment all of his self-esteem was shattered. In a brief second he was exposed, made naked beneath the gaze of the absolute standard of holiness. As long as Isaiah could compare himself to other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his own character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was morally destroyed and spiritually annihilated. He was undone. He came apart. His sense of integrity collapsed.

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- a. This description of man's response to the holiness of God seems extreme. Is this a necessary experience for spiritual maturity, or is this kind of disintegration only appropriate for Old Testament prophets?

- b. If we are all sinful people, as the Bible clearly teaches (Romans 3:23 and Ephesians 2:1-3), then this sort of reaction is appropriate for anyone beginning to understand who God really is. Why do you think this experience of being undone is rare among believers?

3. An emphasis in our culture today is on self-actualization, feeling good about one's self, and having a healthy self-image. If in a class setting, have two class members do a role play—one taking the part of Isaiah and the other acting as a spokesman for our modern-day emphasis. Have each explain his own position and then critique the other.

4. After Isaiah had been cleansed from his sin, he responded by volunteering to serve as God's prophet. Dr. Sproul makes the following observation about Isaiah's reply:

Isaiah was not Humpty Dumpty. In the nursery rhyme the fall of Mr. Dumpty is tragic because no one in the entire kingdom could be found who had the power to put him together again. Yet he was no more fragile than Isaiah. Isaiah was shattered into as many pieces as any fallen egg. But God put him together again. God was able to take a shattered man and send him into the ministry. He took a sinful man and made him a prophet. He took a man with a dirty mouth and made him God's spokesman.

How can we guard against the danger of seeing only the trauma of encountering the holiness of God and not seeing the grace that He extends to those who repent?

5. Dr. Sproul began this lecture with the story of a woman who was angered because she thought her pastor did everything he could to conceal the true identity of God from her each week in worship. Why do you think this occurs?

6. Can you think of a world religion or religious sectarian group which promotes their god as holy, holy, holy? Why not? What characteristic of their god is most often promoted instead?

7. Skim through the gospel of Matthew, noting how frequently Jesus makes use of the oracles of weal and woe. Note especially the frequency of each type, to whom it was spoken, and the consequences which are said to follow each one. Do the results portray Jesus differently than you might have imagined?

8. A tremendous word of comfort is that God is ready to cleanse and forgive. Do you find Him to be that way? If He is not reluctant to forgive, why are so many hostile to His invitation? (For a profound treatment of this disparity, read Chapter Four, "The Trauma of Holiness" and Chapter Nine, "God in the Hands of Angry Sinners" in Dr. Sproul's book, *The Holiness of God*.)

9. Would Isaiah agree that the pain of cleansing sin must surpass the trauma of sensing our sin? Which was worse—the burning coal or the psychological disintegration? How painful was it for Jesus to experience the cross for our cleansing?

10. The Westminster Confession of Faith states the following regarding the doctrine of man’s sin:

VI. OF THE FALL OF MAN, OF SIN, AND OF THE PUNISHMENT THEREOF

1. Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory.
2. By this sin they (Adam and Eve) fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.
3. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation.
4. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

Does this adequately describe Isaiah’s view of himself? How do you respond to this statement? What is the prevailing view of man in the church, the media, and the culture? What effect does a faulty doctrine of sin have upon the doctrine of God and salvation?

APPLICATION

1. How is it we have become comfortable with our own imperfections? In what sense have we come to expect the right to sin (“To err is human”)? Reflect on

Pink's quote, "We have learned to live with unholiness and have come to look upon it as the natural and expected thing." In what areas have you accommodated your relationships, life-style tolerance, and thinking to this outlook?

2. Dr. Sproul writes:

We are fortunate in one respect: God does not appear to us in the way He appeared to Isaiah. Who could stand it? God normally reveals our sinfulness to us a bit at a time. We experience a gradual recognition of our own corruption. God showed Isaiah his corruptions all at once. No wonder he was ruined.

List those areas of remaining sin in your life which you know to be wrong in the sight of God. Begin with just one, and through Bible study, prayer, counsel from others, and reliance upon the power of the Spirit, work until you have made real progress. Resolve to focus upon this until new, godly habits have been formed.

3. According to Dr. Sproul:

The second important thing we learn from this event is that God's work of grace upon Isaiah's soul did not annihilate his personal identity. Isaiah said, "Here am I." Isaiah could still speak in terms of "I." He still had an identity. He still had a personality. Far from God seeking to destroy the "self," as many distortions of Christianity would claim, God redeems the self. He heals the self so that it may be useful and fulfilled in the mission to which the person is called. Isaiah's personality was overhauled, but not annihilated. He was still Isaiah Ben Amoz when he left the temple. He was the same person, but his mouth was clean.

Recall those aspects of your personality and identity that were "overhauled" in your conversion and subsequent growth in grace. How have they become useful to God in a ministry sense? Prayerfully consider how God can use your uniqueness and personal gifts now that they are fit for His use.

4. Sin is principally a violation of our relationship with a holy God. But, as Dr. Sproul reminds us:

When we sin we not only commit treason against God but we do violence to each other. Sin violates people. There is nothing abstract about it. By my sin I hurt human beings. I injure their person; I despoil their goods; I impair their

reputation; I rob from them a precious quality of life; I crush their dreams and aspirations for happiness. When I dishonor God I dishonor all of mankind who bears His image. No wonder then that God takes sin so seriously.

Consider a particular sin or broken relationship in your life. Resolve to take the appropriate steps necessary to seek forgiveness and restoration as God, in Christ, has forgiven you.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

The corresponding sections of Dr. Sproul's book, *The Holiness of God*

The corresponding sections of Jerry Bridges' book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*