

## ***Getting Desperate***

### ***Isaiah 6***

Last week we began a sermon series entitled “Desperate.” We’re exploring Scriptures that give us healthy, God-honoring ways of responding when we find ourselves in situations that tempt us to lose hope, give up, and despair. Last Sunday we saw that we always have the option of crying out to God with fervent, persistent prayer. Since God is the rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6), a great option is to seek Him passionately. In weeks ahead we’ll talk about other options (depending on the circumstances): we can lament, we can repent, we can humble ourselves, we can take bold action.

This morning we are going to back up a step and ask some questions like, “What type of person actually responds in these healthy, God-honoring ways?” And “How can we become that type of person?” These are important questions to ask because two people can experience the exact same circumstances and respond in very different ways. For example, consider two people who commit the exact same sin (gossip or anger or pride or immorality of some type). One person may be so convicted of that sin that s/he desperately pleads with God for forgiveness and cleansing; that person is truly repentant and humble before God. But another person might commit the exact same sin and shrug his/her shoulders and say, “Yeah, I sort of messed up. But I’m not a bad person. I’m not as bad as most people I know.” There is no desperation, no longing for God to cleanse and restore.

Jesus told a parable with a similar scenario in Luke 18:9-14.

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ 13 “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ 14 “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Why do some of us act like the Pharisee (proud, smug, prone to comparison) and others of us like the tax-collector who was desperate for God’s mercy?

A core reason involves ***whether or not we actually know God***. People who know God are desperate for God to do what only He can do. People who only know information about God are like the Pharisee: self-sufficient and arrogant. One of the core things we can do to “get desperate” (in a healthy way) is to encounter God directly every chance we get. Instead of being satisfied with hearing about God and talking about God, we can seek God directly (in many different ways). Scripture teaches that those who seek Him find Him. Those who find Him become desperate for Him in all the right ways.

Today we'll consider Isaiah 6. In this chapter Isaiah describes how his encounter with God made him desperate: desperate about his own sin and about the sin of the people. I'm not implying that you and I **have** to have experiences with God that are as overwhelming and immediate as Isaiah's. But we shouldn't rule out such encounters with God because they're recorded throughout the old and new testaments. My main encouragement will be to put ourselves in a place where we can experience/know God day in and day out. Over time that direct experience with God will keep us desperate in a healthy, God-honoring sense. If we actually **know God** we will cry out to Him with our petitions, with our laments, with repentance.

***Experiencing God makes us desperate in healthy, God-honoring ways. (Isaiah 6)***

Here Isaiah describes his calling as a prophet to Israel.

1 In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

Uzziah was a good, faithful king who reigned 52 years in Judah. Having reigned for over half a century meant that his death was something of a crisis in the life of Judah and in the life of Isaiah. Significantly, during the year that the **earthly** king died, Isaiah saw the **heavenly** King in all His splendor.

It is striking that Isaiah writes, "I saw the Lord," because a theme that runs through the Bible is that you can't "see" God and survive the experience (e.g., Exodus 33:20). In some way God made Himself visible to Isaiah, veiling some of His consuming glory. Interestingly, when Isaiah describes what he saw, he doesn't describe God's face or muscles or size. He simply says that God was "sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple."

Isaiah gets a glimpse of God as the exalted, reigning King of all creation. Notice that Isaiah sees God enthroned not in a palace, but in the temple! In saying that "the train of His robe" filled the temple, Isaiah was saying that God filled the temple. His glory was full to overflowing.

2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

The seraphim were angels who served as the Lord's royal attendants. The term seraphim means simply "fiery ones." Since "fire is everywhere associated with God's holiness (Exodus 3:1-6, 13:21, 19:18; Lev. 10:1-2; etc.) . . . it would be entirely appropriate for those who declare that holiness [would be] fiery in their appearance" (Oswalt, Isaiah, p. 179). The description of the seraphim's six wings is somewhat enigmatic. Perhaps the overall impression was that even these fiery beings were neither able to look **at** God nor worthy to be looked at **by** God. With two wings they covered their faces; with two wings they covered their feet (perhaps representing their entire bodies); with two they flew.

3 And one called out to another and said,  
"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts,  
The whole earth is full of His glory."

Many would say that holiness is the foundational attribute of God, the attribute that sums up all of His other attributes. The term "holy" essentially meant "set apart" or "consecrated." First and foremost, to say that God is holy is to say that He is set apart from everything else. God is in a class by Himself; He is in a category all His own.

You might remember the children's prayer, "God is great, God is good, now we thank Him for this food. Amen." The word holy captures both the greatness and the goodness of God. God is set apart in terms of His greatness - none compare to Him in terms of power, majesty, and authority. And God is set apart in terms of His goodness - none compare to Him in terms of His justice, wisdom, compassion, and mercy.

To repeat something three times was the strongest form of the superlative in Hebrew (Oswalt, p. 181). By saying "Holy, holy, holy" the seraphim were saying that God is as holy as He possibly can be. God is so holy that the temple cannot contain the glory of God; rather, "the whole earth is full of His glory." The term "glory" comes from a root meaning "weighty" or "solid." If you care to look at creation you will see that God is no light-weight. His glory can be seen in the tiniest flower as well as in the highest mountain.

Verse 4 tells us that when these seraphim called out to each other that the foundations started to shake.

4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

It was as if Isaiah were in the midst of an earthquake. At the same time the temple was filling with smoke. Isaiah experienced the holiness of God in a very comprehensive way: he saw it, heard it, felt it and smelled it. This encounter with the holiness of God had an observable impact upon Isaiah's writings. Isaiah refers to God as "The Holy One of Israel/Jacob" 26 times in his writings; this title is found only 6 times in the rest of the Old Testament. When Isaiah directly encountered the holiness of God, he was forever changed.

When he saw God's holiness, he also saw his own sinfulness:

5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!  
Because I am a man of unclean lips,  
And I live among a people of unclean lips;  
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Basically Isaiah was terrified. "Woe is me, for I am ruined" – destroyed or undone. God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29)! Isaiah thought he would be consumed because "my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." How would you feel if you woke up

to find yourself in a room with a hungry tiger. I would imagine that's a bit how Isaiah felt when he realized he was a sinful man in the presence of a holy God!

When he encountered God, Isaiah instinctively confessed his sin and the sin of the nation by saying,

"I am a man of unclean lips,  
And I live among a people of unclean lips. . ."

Isaiah didn't confess his lack of greatness; he confessed his lack of goodness. Sinfulness does not consist in not being as "great" as God; sinfulness consists of not being as "good" as God – lacking His moral perfection. Isaiah wasn't comparing himself to other people; if he did he might have evaluated himself rather differently. Rather, he was comparing himself to a thrice-holy God.

Having unclean lips wasn't a minor offense. Unclean lips represent an unclean heart; Jesus taught that the lips speak whatever fills the heart. Biblically speaking, we live from the heart (the command and control center of our lives). Even though he would have been one of the most holy people in Israel, Isaiah understood that he was ruined/destroyed/undone because his heart was corrupt. He described the sinfulness of Israel using the same terms.

When Isaiah experienced God in His holiness, he became a desperate man. As we'll see in a few minutes, because he was desperate he received God's cleansing. When was the last time you encountered God in all of His holiness and became desperate for God's cleansing? This is different than having a mental awareness of your sin. I could read the ten commandments and you might say, "Yep, I've broken 7 of those commandments." I could read Paul's list of the deeds of the flesh in Galatians 5 and you might say, "I do a bunch of those deeds." You can have that mental awareness of your sin and not be desperate the way Isaiah was. That type of desperation comes when you are face to face with God Himself.

There's an interesting phenomenon in woodworking that illustrates this point. When you're working in a shop with artificial light, a piece of wood you're sanding can look perfectly smooth and ready to be finished. But when you take that piece of wood outside and see it in natural light, you often see all sorts of imperfections. I never put finish on something I've not examined in natural light. In a similar way, it's only when we see ourselves in the light of God's holiness that we see imperfections/sins that are otherwise no big deal. We see our pride and our selfishness in the light of God's holiness; we don't notice those things if we avoid God's presence.

Please understand that this isn't an exercise in self-condemnation. Seeing my sin in light of God's holiness is the first step to healing and wholeness. When I go my doctor I'm eager to know the truth/reality. If I tell him that I've got a pain that shoots down my arm and makes my fingers numb, I don't want him to tell me, "Don't worry about it; I examined a guy yesterday who's got nerve damage 10x worse than that." No, I want the truth about myself; I want to understand the reality of what I've got so I can know if

there's any remedy. When I go into God's presence I want to see the truth; I want to see the reality of my sin so that I can experience cleansing through Jesus' blood and so that I know how I should think and live differently.

I'm afraid that many people read the Bible attend church and never encounter God directly, never make eye-contact with Him. Consequently they live in a make-believe world because they never enter into God's presence and see the sinfulness of their sin. My strong encouragement to you is to step out into the light of God's presence and quit skulking around in the shadows. Whether you're reading your Bible and praying alone or whether you are in a room of people singing and praying and hearing the Word, don't hide from God; don't shield yourself from His scrutiny. Go the opposite direction and pray what David prayed in Psalm 139:23. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way."

Isaiah saw God's holiness and became desperate because he saw his own sinfulness. But in verses 6 and 7 he experienced the gospel, the good news, the only solution to the problem of sinfulness.

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 And he touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."

It is terrifying enough to see God the King high and exalted with flaming angels shaking the house with their pronouncements of His holiness. But what would you do if a flaming angel started flying at you? What would you do if this angel (using tongs, of course) brought a burning coal close to your lips? If you could, you'd probably run. Isaiah knew he was in trouble already by just being there, but when he saw the flaming angel coming at his face with hot coals, he probably thought, "This is definitely it." Isaiah had read in Deuteronomy where Moses warned the people with the words, "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God" (4:24). He probably thought he was about to be consumed.

But wonder of wonders, the fire didn't consume Isaiah - it only consumed his sin! He had confessed, "I am a man of unclean lips," so the angel touched his lips with the burning coal. Being taken from the altar, this coal represented a sacrifice made on Isaiah's behalf. In other words, this vision is consistent with what we find throughout Scripture, namely that "without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin" (Hebrews 9:22). God didn't wave His hand and tell Isaiah, "I'm feeling gracious today so your sin is forgiven." No, sin must be paid for - Isaiah's sin must be paid for. The coal from the altar indicates that God accepted the death of another for Isaiah's sin; God had provided a sacrifice and a substitute for Isaiah.

We can only imagine Isaiah's astonishment when the seraphim pronounced, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." Isaiah's cleansing and forgiveness were instantaneous, purely an act of God's grace.

No penance was required; there was no period of probation. Isaiah experienced what God had promised to the nation back in Isaiah 1:18:

"Though your sins are as scarlet,  
They will be as white as snow;  
Though they are red like crimson,  
They will be like wool."

By God's grace, Isaiah's sin was removed; he was now able to abide in the presence of a holy God. Now that he had a clean heart and clean lips, God actually commissioned Isaiah to speak on His behalf. We don't have time this morning to look at the rest of Isaiah 6, but there you will see that because Isaiah experienced God's holiness and experienced God's cleansing, he was able to represent God to others.

Isaiah's cleansing foreshadows the cleansing we can receive in Jesus Christ. Just as God provided a sacrifice on an altar for Isaiah, God has provided a sacrifice (His one and only Son) on an altar (a Roman cross).

If you have never heard the diagnosis - "sinful" – that Isaiah did, please hear it today. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Please hear, also, that you can be cleansed as Isaiah was. Admit that you are sinful and accept that Jesus died on the cross as your substitute. When you trust in Him in this way, God applies Jesus' holiness to your life. Your heart is cleansed by the blood of Jesus and you can now dwell in the presence of a holy God. If you are desperate to be forgiven cleansed and to have a relationship with the God who is "holy, holy, holy," put your trust in Jesus this morning.

If you are already a believer, are you in the habit of encountering God Himself directly day by day? Are you seeking to experience God first-hand through the Word, through prayer, through creation? Or are you content to hear about the first-hand accounts of others? If you don't experience God first-hand you'll eventually become bored with the Bible and Church and Christians and ministry. Even though we can't force experiences with God, we can put ourselves in a position to experience Him firsthand: we can desire God, we can ask God to reveal Himself, we can enter into worship whole-heartedly, we expect God to speak through His Word.

Today as we celebrate the Lord's Table, you and I have the opportunity to enter into the very presence of God and experience Him through the bread and the cup. Be nourished through the truth that Christ's body was broken for us and that His blood was shed for us.

This week consider these passages that either describe or advocate experiencing God directly:

Exodus 3:1-6

Psalms 95

Luke 19:1-10

1 John 1:5-9

2 Corinthians 12:1-10