

The One Not Like Us!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 November 2024

Preacher: James Murray

[0 : 0 0] I keep coming back to this passage again and again, and every time I come back to it, I learn something more about it. You see, I don't think we understand holiness. We do in some senses, and then we really don't in others. So, I want to go over this famous passage, one I'm sure you've heard preached on before, and I hope, my hope and my prayer is that we get a new insight in what it means for God to be holy, and what that means for you and for I, because it has massive implications. Now, the first thing I want to do is just, whenever you come to a place like this, just give us a wee bit of context. I'm dropping you into the middle of, well, the middle of the Bible that is out of the way. So, I'm going to give us a wee bit of context, because the first verse opens up there, in the year that King Uzziah died, this is a timestamp. This is the equivalent to maybe our modern historians saying 9-11. That is a timestamp, a period of our history, which we all refer to our pre- or post-COVID. That is a timestamp in history that we can all, that history has changed around. Here, this timestamp in the year that King Uzziah died is a big turning point. You see, the people in Israel lived under the prosperity of King Uzziah, the tenth king after Solomon. So, that's the tenth kingdom after the split between Israel, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, and there's a split between Israel and Judah. He reigned for 52 years. That is a long time, second longest in all of the kings. Judah had peace because its enemies was distracted. Its old enemy of the south, Egypt was distracted by internal succession fights. So, they were looking inward.

Then the only other power was Assyria off to the east. I'm trying to do a mental map in my head. Off to the east. Again, they were squabbling for power within themselves. They needed to shore up their borders. They were not looking to go out west and conquest at that moment. So, Judah and Israel, because they were split at this time, they flourished. They flourished massively. They regained all their land that they had under King Solomon. So, massive expansion. Their military was strong.

They were thriving financially because you see where Israel is situated, all the powers have to go through it. So, in times of peace, they prospered because trade went through. But in times of war, it was like being crushed between boulders. So, they flourished. They flourished financially.

But yet, this finance did not bless them. It ended up nearly cursing them because the temple was active. It was really active. You'd turn up to it and think, well, wow, these people are flourishing. These people are really faithful. But throughout Isaiah, he does nothing but give condemnations on the people worshiping. Basically, their hearts are far from me. At one stage in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah turns around, you know, God's speaking through him and says, the Lord has had enough of your sacrifices, enough of them. They basically sting His noses. I've had enough of your sacrifice.

I have enough of your nominalism, enough of you turning up to me and offering the sacrifices, but keeping your heart. With that, justice was being bought and sold. So, the nations looked like they were flourishing, Israel and Judah. But in reality, they were slowly decaying. By the end of King Uzziah's life, the Assyrians had firmed up their borders. They had firmed up their succession problems and who was in power, and now they were looking west. They were looking west, and they were looking west to conquer. And this is the time that Isaiah was a prophet.

[4 : 20] This is not a good time in Israel's history. This is a time where they were going to be destroyed for their lack of faithfulness to God. But it is in this time that Isaiah receives one of his most transforming visions and experiences in his whole life. And it impacted him the rest of his life.

And so, I hope it will impact us today. That is the shortest way I can give that context. It's like drop zoning you into the middle of Europe without any street signs and without being able to speak a lick of the language. So, that is the shortest way. We are not in a good time period. And yet, it is here that we see this God that is like no other, that is incomparable, and that we should have faith and trust in. And I want to get into that. The first thing we see there, verses 1 to 4, is this God like no other God. This God like no other God. We read at the very beginning, I saw the Lord sitting upon his throne. The word there, if you're reading in the ESV, big capital L, lowercase O-R-D, that is a way of them saying that is the word Lord for Adonai, as master. So, he sees his master sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, the train of his robe filling the temple. All right, so here's his master. He is sitting upon his throne. The smallest hem of his, well, his being, his majesty, is enough to fill this temple. Now, we could go into all of the meanings of this that has to do with this is a picture of God's redemptiveness, that He is still ongoing, that He is eternal, that He is, the wording there is that the train of His robe isn't just, hasn't just filled the temple. It's filling, which means that His temple is expanding, and it means that also His glory is also, it's continually growing. He's eternal. He is non-stop. He is not static.

But what's interesting to note, and I didn't notice this the few other times I kept looking at this, is that's the end of talking about this God. That's the end of it. Isaiah's great big vision, and he gets one verse, and not even a full verse to him. That doesn't seem right. But if you look at it, if I was an Egyptian or an Assyrian of that day, I would look at that passage and go, okay, here's the God sitting upon His throne. Yeah, He's high and lifted up. It's higher than everyone. Okay, everything seems normal. To someone in 750-ish BC, this is normal. This is normal for how they describe their gods. Then we start to see something else, because He starts to describe the seraphim.

Above Him stood the seraphim, each had six wings. With two, He covered His face. With two, He covered His feet. With two, He flew. Now, there has been 2,000, actually more than 2,000 years worth of, what do the wings mean? It could mean that, oh, there's six wings, so they're, you know, the perfect number seven. They're almost perfect beings, but they're not quite close to God, but they're very close. That's why they're close to the throne. You could go for any number of things, but I want to notice two things. What are they doing? Because they're doing two things.

The first, and the most obvious, is they're worshiping. They're worshiping these terrifying beings, because this is what they are. They're terrifying. You don't meet these things and go, oh, I want to give you a cuddle. You fall down in your face, terrified, which is why, by the way, through the Bible, every time an angel shows up, it says, do not be afraid, because in fairness, the description of them isn't exactly comforting. And they call out to one another, holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.

[8 : 33] Now, word holy, holy, holy. Maybe we're not familiar with the language. Sometimes with the word holy, we get the picture of set aside for religious-y things. Fair enough. An idea of something being set aside is quite right. But holy simply means like no other, like no other.

This here is one who is completely different, and they utter it in the tri-part, holy, holy, holy. The completeness. Now, we can refer to it as, well, it's completeness as well in the Trinity.

Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord. Then, notice in your ESV Bibles, because it's good to go back to the Hebrew. This, the big L, then it's all capital letters, but capital letters O-R-D. This, when you see that in your Old Testament, in the ESV, that means it is translating the word Yahweh, the covenant name of God to His people, the one that He shared with His people. And every time an Israelite would have come across this word, they would have looked at it, and it was meant to be a signpost. A wee reminder, this is the God of faithfulness. This is the God of chesed, covenant faithfulness. He has covenanted with us. He has made a promise to me and my people. He is faithful. He has always been faithful. He always will be faithful. So, here is this God who is holy, holy, holy. He is not like any others. And here is the one who is faithful. He is faithful to us, and He is the Lord of hosts, that word hosts, fancy old word, armies. Here is the God of might, of power, of authority, of legions of angels. The whole earth is full of His glory. They're worshiping God. They're surrounding Him, and the only thing fit for them to do is worship God. They see God, and they worship Him in ecstasy. So much so that it says, verse 4, the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of Him who called. I think it's right to interpret that. So, the word there when it says shake is actually, it's saying that the foundations of heaven are shaking like a drunkard. That is the correct way to translate that word of shake.

It's like a drunkard. Heaven was wobbling because of the praise of the angels. And then the house was filled with smoke, and smoke would go to revelations. That is a book of revelation. That is associated with the glory of God. But there's one other thing that they do as well.

So, they're worshiping as is only appropriate. In absolute ecstasy, which is, by the way, an amazing picture of heaven. There is no celebration in any football stadium that will compare with this.

[11 : 35] Yet, I want you to look at what the seraphim were doing. They covered their face, covered their feet, and two, they flew. Now, here's the part that gets a bit weird.

The seraphim weren't actually just in the Bible. I wish it actually sent the PowerPoint. You can find the ancient descriptions of the seraphim from other cultures at this time. In fact, in the Egyptian mythology, they were common. They were common. There were these winged beings, and they're on the side of the throne of the pharaohs. There's these winged beings. Now, the winged beings are also snakes, because that word for the seraphim is actually only used one other time in Scripture, and it's used to describe the snakes that went through the camp of Israel when they sinned against God. God sends these burnished snakes, these fiery serpents. Again, this was common in Egypt, but these things, these seraphim, these weird beings, which also could be used to translate as dragons, by the way, normally, they were bodyguards for the ancient gods. These were the bodyguards. These were the beings that hung around the throne of the god that they were protecting, because all the other gods,

Ra and whoever, they were in constant battles with the forces of chaos. It wasn't this equal, or it was a tit for tat. Ra and all the Egyptian gods, they had to fight to maintain order and keep the chaos at bay.

So much so that even their lives, the Egyptian gods and the Mesopotamian gods, they could die. So, they had bodyguards. And these bodyguards were serpentine beings with two wings that flew beside them.

Here, we have these serpentine beings, but they had six wings. So, not only are they greater, but they stand before God, but they stand before God, and they aren't guarding Him. They are protecting themselves from the glory of God. Look, look. Two, they flew. Two, they covered their face. Two, they covered their feet. They only exposed body parts of these beings. They covered. They covered them in protection of being near this being. They couldn't stand the weight of His glory and His majesty. So, they had to protect themselves from this God. They were not protecting God from anything.

[14 : 28] You see, this God is unlike any other God. He doesn't need protecting. He needs His bodyguards, His royal companions to protect themselves from Him. There is no fight. There is no battle. Our God is not like other gods where there has to be this give and take. In our world today, it's often seen that all the forces of chaos are led up against the forces of good, or the forces of Satan array themselves against the kingdom of heaven. There is no such competition with our God as we just sung in that psalm. You are not like other gods. Here is one who is like no other gods. There are similarities that all of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Mesopotamians would have understood, but here is one who is not like them. Do not misinterpret this, God. He is so mighty, so powerful that even His beings that are meant to guard Him have to guard themselves from His glory and might.

And that is a part, this is a part of the holiness of God that we get. We get this part. God is not like us. Who could ever stand before the Lord? Who could ever be before Him? We'd burn up in a crisp.

Even the seraphim, these mighty, mighty beings covered themselves, protected themselves from Him. And then we come to verse 5, which is relatable. Taking in mind what we've just saw with these seraphim, how would you feel in the position of Isaiah? Because we've got a God like no other gods, but we've got a man here like every other man, one with sin, one who is now standing naked before the Lord with no wings to cover Him. And what is his response? Woe is me, for I am lost.

The wording, we can never do this justice. We can't do this justice. This is essentially, I am undone. In fact, the wording there is the same as a prophet condemning a pagan nation. This is, I deserve to die. I deserve to die. This is a knee-jerk reaction coming from him.

So, before you have the seraphim, their knee-jerk reaction is not only to protect themselves, their knee-jerk reaction is they see the holiness of God and they are overcome with worship.

[17 : 09] Here, Isaiah sees the holiness of God and he is overcome with terror. The response out of his mouth, in the same way that whenever we hit a table with our toe, we go, ow, whenever Isaiah sees the holiness of God, he falls. He says, I deserve to die.

I deserve to die. This is judgment language. Covenant, Old Testament, prophet of God, judgment language, but he is not applying it to others. He is applying it right to himself.

The reason, I'm a man of unclean lips. He's a prophet. He's meant to speak the words of God. My lips are unclean and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips. My entire family are sinners. I'm a sinner and I'm before this God. The reason for his damnation, my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Notice the wording, even in the Hebrew, is exactly the same as the angels.

They see the Lord of hosts. Worship, amazement. He sees the Lord of hosts. Judgment. I'm damned.

I cannot be before this God. The seraphim covered themselves. Even though they were without sin, they covered themselves to protect themselves from the power, the weight of the glory.

[18 : 48] Here, Isaiah, filled with sin and no wings, face. Face be in the presence of a holy and just and mighty God with nothing in between.

We can't begin to experience what that was like. And yet, this is the future for everyone who doesn't believe. This is the future. And it's terrifying. All are condemned. All have sinned without a mediator.

We don't have wings that we can sprout from our back to cover ourselves from God. We cannot hide from God like Adam and Eve. Someday, we must give a count. And our count without a mediator is terrifying. It's terrifying. It is not something to be dealt with glibly. I deal with this all the time.

Oh, sure, I'm a good enough person. I'm this. I'm that. You have no mediator. The words from a mouth of a person without Christ will be, they will condemn themselves. They'll condemn themselves. They'll say, I deserve to die. Here's the one I've offended. God won't even have to say anything.

It will be like stubbing your toe. Ouch. But in this way, you come before, you see the Lord of hosts without a mediator, without a sacrifice. You will say, I deserve judgment and everything I get.

[20 : 26] And if we left it there, it would be a terrible story and it would be one that we wouldn't really want to return to. But this is the great part. This is the great part of this story. And this is why God is not just a God like no other. He is a being like no other. I want to turn you to this little book. It's called Gentle and Lonely by Dian Orlund. I carry it around all the time. This is a beautiful book. It summarizes so much of the Puritans thinking about the heart of God and the heart of Christ to sinners. And I want you, I'll be reading from this in a minute, but I want to bring this up. Go get this book. It's beautiful because it really helps with this. Here is Isaiah. He is flailing in his sin, in his condemnation of himself. He is before the crushing weight of the glory of God.

And what happens? One of the seraphim, one of the messengers of God, 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. Your sin atoned for.

God didn't leave him there. But more than anything, he sent his own messenger to go to Isaiah. Isaiah. I want you to notice, where did he take the coal from? The altar. What is the altar? The altar is the place of sacrifice, of reconciliation between God and man. It is the place where a sacrifice is made. Where was Isaiah's sacrifice? There wasn't one. There's no sacrifice. He didn't offer any, but a sacrifice had been made. A sacrifice had been made for him.

And it was from this sacrifice that his guilt is taken away. It's expunged. It's done away with.

Your sin atoned for. You have been cleansed. This is the gospel. Here is a sinner who comes before the holy of holies.

[23 : 14] And God moves to forgive his sin. What has Isaiah done in this? Isaiah has done nothing but condemn himself. Woe is me. I'm undone. I deserve to die. He has done nothing but admitted his guilt.

He has done nothing but did not. But he has done nothing but done. He has done nothing but who takes initiative and sends his servant to him with a sacrifice that he didn't make.

That is atoned for his guilt. This is a picture of the gospel from the Old Testament. Right from the very heart of the Holy of Holies. You see, a great wee line here from Dian.

In his justice, God is exacting. Exacting. He is precise. He is not, when it comes to justice, he is not tyrannical. He is not dictatorial. He is not cruel. He will give the perfect punishment for the crime. But in his mercy, God is overflowing. Overflowing. So when we come to passages like Psalm 130, my thoughts are not your thoughts. Neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. I don't think we understand that. I don't think we get that. I think whenever we think of God and the holiness of God, we see his justice. We get Isaiah. We get him before the Holy of Holies. Who could ever stand before that? But then we totally, and I think so often, forget just how great his mercy is. We make his justice lavish. And we make his mercy quiet. It is the other way around. His justice is no more than his right. But his mercy is beyond compare. We need to change our mode of thinking here. We need to switch around our thoughts here day and again. What is God saying? He is telling us that we cannot view his expression of his mercy with our old eyes. Our very view of God must change. What would we say to a seven-year-old upon being given a birthday gift by his loving father immediately scrambled to reach for his piggy bank to try and pay his dad back? How painful would that be? And yet we are so often like that. We so often see the depths of our sin and are rightly hurt by it. We sit there and go,

I know what I've done. I know what I've thought. And we immediately think that because of that, our mediator, our savior, the lover of our soul goes, I cannot be near you. And it's the opposite.

[26 : 20] It's the opposite. Here's words from Thomas Goodwin. Christ takes part with you and is far from being provoked against you in your sin. All his anger is turned upon your sin to ruin it. His pity is increased the more towards you, even as the heart of a father is to a child that has some loathsome disease, or as one is a member of his body that has his leprosy. He hates not the member for it is his flesh, but the disease that provokes him to pity the part affected.

Our sin, our indwelling shame, all the things that we think would make Christ stay away from us, does nothing but draw him to us nearer and closer.

How cruel of a father would I be when my son comes to me and says he has hurt his knee, and I turn around in anger going, you should have known better. Rather, I embrace him, and I want to heal his knee. I want to make him better.

When my boy is sick, I want him to be made well. His sickness doesn't keep me away from him. It makes me want to bring him closer, to hug him, to make him well, to give him ointment, to give him cream, to give him medicine. I want you to be well, son. I don't want you to be sick.

Our sin, the sin of those who are loved by Christ, it has the opposite effect than what we think. God is drawn to you, not repelled by you, even in our deepest sin. If we cling to Christ as our hope, we need to change this around. God's justice has been met. Now his love is overflowing to you, greater than we can ever imagine. Your sin, rather than repulsing God from you, draws Christ ever closer to you than you can imagine. He wants you well. He wants you whole.

[28 : 48] Because our God is like no other. He is like no other in power, but he is like no other in his mercy and his compassion. So much so, he is not like you or I. So we need to change our thinking. God is not like us.

And that is our hope. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.