

LET US DRAW NEAR - Biblical Worship and the Warming of the Soul – Part one

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“OPEN THE EYES OF MY HEART, LORD. I WANT TO SEE YOU”- ARE YOU SURE?

Isaiah 6:1-8 - “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; 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. [3] And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’ [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!’ [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.’ [8] And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’”

This passage of Scripture never uses the word **“worship”** once. The subject is never specifically referred to. Yet we all know Isaiah is very close to the heart of what the essence of worship is about because he’s describing something that defines what our lives, as worshipers, are all about. He’s describing **what it’s like to encounter God**.

This is ground zero when it comes to defining worship. In a world drowning in trivia, this is what **matters**. Think about **religion**. Why do we go to church? Why do we pray? Why do we read and meditate on the Scriptures? Why do we serve? None of these exercises is an **end in itself**. They only have value to the degree they **bring us to God and delight God**.

Encountering God is what true worship **means**. God is **omnipresent**, meaning He is close to all of us all the time. None of us can live our lives **removed** from His presence. But that is not the same as **experiencing** His presence. And **experiencing** God is what this passage describes. So here’s the question: **What should happen when a person encounters God?** How shall we determine whether the alleged encounter is genuine or counterfeit? What are the **long term effects** of meeting God genuinely? What part of life is touched beside the emotions? What’s the difference between **encountering God** and being **stirred up by a cool song with a religious crowd?**

In this series of teachings we’re going to begin by, first of all, studying something of the **theology** of worship. What exactly **is** worship? Is worship that important? What should worship **accomplish** in our own lives? We’re going to try to establish what the **Word** teaches - what **God** says about the meaning and measure of worship, after all, it’s what **He** says about worship that counts.

Then, in following messages we’re going to study the **practice** of worship. What do New Testament **expressions** of worship look like? Why do we do the things we do? Are we doing them right? Are we on track? Does it matter, as long as we’re sincere?

But before we go too far down the road let’s look at some key elements of God-encounter from this great passage from Isaiah. We’ll study two points this Sunday and two more next Sunday:

1) **BEFORE WORSHIP IS A MATTER OF RECOGNIZING GOD’S GREATNESS. IT IS RECOGNIZING GOD’S AUTHORITY**

Isaiah 6:1,5b - “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord **sitting upon a throne**, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple....[5b] for my eyes have **seen the King**, the Lord of hosts!”

When the smoke clears and the dust settles, there’s only one object at the center of Isaiah’s vision - a **throne**. If that isn’t clear enough, Isaiah Google maps the position of this throne for us. All he can say is it’s **“high and lifted up”** (6:1). He doesn’t mean it’s a very, very **tall** throne. He means it’s **over everything else**. There is nothing anywhere in all the universe **above** this throne.

As we’ll see later on this has strong implications for a Christian vision of God when it’s pressure on our hearts becomes radically counter-cultural.

The vision gets even more specific. The Person everyone’s fussing over isn’t just some vague Eternal Spirit, some Uncaused First Cause, or the Ground of all Being, or the Life Spirit of the universe. Isaiah sees a **King**. This Being is

defined, first and foremost, in terms of His absolute **authority** and **rulership**.

Now, because, in North America, we don't conceptualize monarchies as clearly as some nations, we have come to think of kings and queens as **figureheads**. In fact, that's what they have become in much of the world. But this was not so in Isaiah's time. The king controlled all the resources of the kingdom. Predominantly, the king controlled the **military**. He was the one person with the authority to deal with any **challenges** to his rule.

It is striking to note the way the **context** of Isaiah's vision presses this **kingship** of God with such a sharp edge. We find, in the very first verse of this chapter, reference to the recent death of Judah's ninth **king, Uzziah**. His is quite a story.

Also known as **Azariah, Uzziah** reigned over Judah for fifty-two years. So Isaiah knew what a monarchy was all about. Kings chose the life styles for their subjects. True monarchies don't have **citizens**. They have **subjects**. That is, the people live in **subjection** to their king. Everyone knew the role of a king in those days. Kings **ruled**. Kings **reigned**.

Now, whatever authority King Uzziah had, and however great his rule, Isaiah had just recently come through a series of actual events that **clearly declared the authority of God and His throne**. Uzziah, for all his great accomplishments in terms of military success and financial power, **didn't obey the instruction of the Lord**. He didn't rid the land of the idols and false gods as the God on the throne had commanded.

Finally, toward the end of his reign, he entered the temple itself and took unto himself the role of priest for the people. **God immediately struck him with leprosy**. And he died a lonely, forgotten exile from his own people. All of this is deeply stamped in Isaiah's mind as he gazes on the **throne of God**. There are **earthly kings** and there is **this** king on **this** throne. The greatest earthly power in Isaiah's world had been reduced to a bleeding, ulcerous recluse because, in his **blind, proud, foolish vanity**, he forgot about the **throne of God**.

This is recorded in such blazing detail so we will never forget it. Behold the lesson of the throne of God! Do worship **passionately**. Do worship **joyfully** (the Lord is in control, even when all earthly security is in turmoil - like when the king dies). But never forget to worship **carefully** and **submissively**.

This is not a **tame** king. He doesn't **serve**. He is **served**. This is not a God you can refuse homage without consequence. I think we need to recapture this truth in our day. Most of the worship I see in the church focuses on the greatness of God's **love** and the beauty of His **presence**.

To the degree worshipers make God more suitable to their tastes they will fail to reach Him. **He** doesn't conform. **We** do.

What is the purpose of worshipping God's **greatness** if I don't **obey** this great God? If God **isn't** great, then I need not obey Him. In fact, if he **isn't** great, I need not bother with Him at all. But if He **is** great - great beyond my wildest ability to comprehend or imagine - and if HE is still seated on a throne - then I had **better** obey Him. My obedience to Him will be the most important thing about my life.

A truly **great** God is a God to be feared, because disobeying or ignoring a truly **great** God must have extremely devastating consequences. The presence of God is not **always** mild and beautiful. Consider that one of the most common occurrences recorded in the Bible when prophets face the glaring call of God is they **hide**.

A minute ago I said most of our contemporary worship focuses on either the beauty of God's presence or the vastness of His love. And all of that is fine because God **is** eternally loving, and His presence is **beautiful** beyond telling. But this is still incomplete. For example, as quickly as you can, think of a worship chorus we currently sing that has the word **judgement** in it. Think of a worship chorus we currently sing that has the word **wrath** in it.

"Well, I think you're being a bit picky, pastor Don. Don't you think we believe in judgement and sin and punishment and all those things?"

Church, I **know** we **believe** in those things. My concern is a little different. My concern is this: What begins to gradually happen to the **background picture** we form of God when, over the course of three or four generations, in the truths we **repeat and express together** (that's what corporate worship is all **about**) the truths that shaped Isaiah's vision of the

throne of God are never once heard in the contemporary corporate worship structures of the church? What impact does this eventually have?

That's my concern. Does anything of substance slowly **dissolve** in the power for purity in a church when those truths about the **impact of the throne of God** aren't freshly carved into our minds each week in our worship services?

Let's face it, this world, for all its blithering about God and spirituality, has little regard for God's throne. We pass laws. We redefine the family. We redefine marriage. We live together common-law because the laws of the land say we don't have to pass through the ritual of the marriage ceremony. We **profess** belief in God while we **fashion our own life-styles**. The church is starting to buy into this mental muck. All the while we are more and more **sentimental** in our expressions of love to God - sometimes bordering on the **sappy and romantic**.

Where's the throne? Good worship should **prepare us for the throne of God** while we are **still here on earth**. That's the whole point of Isaiah's vision of God. The way we worship on Sunday is a divine provision for launching us into God-saturated, counter-cultural service and witness.

Isaiah has this vision of the throne of God to **prepare** him for the coming **call** from that very throne. He is told to go and proclaim judgment on God's people for their **failure to bow before that very same throne revealed to Isaiah**. And they're not going to like this message one bit. So why does Isaiah do it? What makes him obey this hard call?

Isaiah sees God on His throne. His encounter with God has taught him God's will isn't optional just because it's no longer politically correct. Worship should - **must** - put the throne of God vividly in front of everything else in my mind's field of vision. The Bible says everyone will one day see that very same throne Isaiah saw. The Bible points toward my date to stand before the **great throne of God**. The Bible says we will all stand before the **judgement seat of Christ**.

Any way you cut it, **we are all heading toward the throne**. And this is the point where worship - **true** worship - can be of such value. It focuses my life on the throne of God **now**. Worship should make it **impossible** to ignore this throne. The **God we worship is King**. Don't just think about His greatness **in general**. Worship isn't **goeey**. Worship isn't **mystically trancing out**. It's **thinking deep**. Worship is **seeing the Throne**. Think about His **Kingship** when you worship.

2) AFTER EMPHASIZING CAUTION IN WORSHIP, THE NEXT MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENT IS DILIGENCE IN WORSHIP

Isaiah 6:2-4 - "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. [3] And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'[4] And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke."

Even in the worship of these great heavenly beings there is nothing but **humility**. I love the mention of them **covering their faces** with their wings (2). Their worship wasn't **fun**. What is happening here that they couldn't **help** cover their faces?

This God was too **big** for them. He was too **bright** for them. They didn't have to **pretend** to be reverent or humble before this God. They hid their **faces** in a gesture that forever reminds us of the removal of **self** before the throne of God. The only worshiper who remains **proud** or **self-absorbed** is the one who never really **saw** God in his worship at all.

Also, notice the **corporate dimension** to their worship expression. **Verse three** is fascinating: "**And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'**"

Did you notice? When they said, "**Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts...**", they weren't talking **to** God at all. They were shouting out loud **to each other** - "**And one called to another and said....**" (3). It was as though the holiness and purity of God couldn't be adequately experienced **privately**. They are pulled **together** as they are drawn to the **throne**. Something had to be expressed **together with others**. The greatness of their experience of God would be **diminished** if not **shared**.

Something will draw your family together with the people of God in worship that will never happen at the cottage or on the boat. Think about that.

But what I really want to highlight in this second point is the importance of **diligence** in worship. Theologians speculate about the three-fold repetition of the word “holy” - **“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts... (3)**. Some think it relates to the triune nature of the Godhead. While God certainly is three in one, the text doesn’t say this was the cause of the Seraphim’s three-fold repetition.

I still like the old words of **John Calvin** on this verse: **“This repetition rather points out the *unwearied perseverance, as if the teaching is the angels never cease from their melody in singing praises to God, as if the holiness of God supplies us with inexhaustible reasons for worship.*”**

The longer you live the Christian life, you will learn, as I am coming to learn in my own experience, the biggest battle isn’t **becoming** a person of worship. The biggest battle is **remaining** a person of worship. These celestial beings don’t just **bow**, and they don’t just **exclaim**. They bow and wonder and exclaim **continuously**. They never grow **indifferent** and they never grow **silent**. In a wonderful, sacred rhythm, each one is carried forward by the crying out of the others.

There will always be distractions in corporate worship. The Devil will see to that. Too loud. Too long. Too contemporary. Too cold. Too dark. And we do have to work through so many things when we gather. But I love this picture of worshipping beings who can ponder nothing but the holiness of God.

So, first, there must be **caution and carefulness** because we worship before the **throne**. Then, second, there must be **diligence and expression** in worship because we are encouraged by the praise of others and fuel their worship by our own as well. Such corporate praise presses back the dullness and the silence of our own hearts. You need others to worship worthily. Be humble enough to admit it.

This **corporate** element of worship needs reconsidering in the church. There is teaching aplenty on what worship will do for the **worshiper**. I’m correctly reminded of the damage done to my own heart when I **fail** to worship the Lord on the throne. But is there anything else to consider? Am I to learn that not only do I hurt my **own** spiritual growth by stilted worship, but I hurt **yours** as well?

God calls me to worship, not just for **my** growth, but for **yours**. If we never had this flaming text from Isaiah we would still find the same teaching in the writing of Paul:

Ephesians 5:15-21 - “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. [17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit. [19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [21] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Paul calls the church to a careful purity in her walk before the Lord. He calls the church to the wisest use of time in evil days. And here’s the important point. His call to the church to staying pure and staying wise is **pursued** in the way he calls the church to **worship together** - **“...addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ....”**

The reason for this is obvious when we think again about our text in Isaiah chapter 6. Not only did Isaiah become aware of his **own** need - **“I am a man of unclean lips”** - he also became aware of the need of the rest of God’s people - **“I dwell among a people of unclean lips.”** He immediately saw the big picture. This is what worship must **do**. He saw the **community of need** in which he was situated.

Remember this as we press through a dozen or so teachings on worship. Like our text in Isaiah, Paul links **corporate worship** with the call to **purity of life** among the people of God - **Ephesians 5:15-16 - “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”** This is why we **address one another in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”** (5:19).

Worship isn't **icing** on the cake. It's the **cake**. God wants to redeem everything about **you**. And He wants to use your worship to encourage the redeeming of your **brothers and sisters** in this church, and yes, according to Paul, even the **times** in which we live. That's the sweeping, Biblical passion that is to be born in the place where people truly see God on His throne, high and lifted up.

Two more points on this text next week.