



Holiness, sinfulness, grace and service

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Isaiah 6:3

A well-known passage in the book of Isaiah is Isaiah's vision of the LORD. What was the purpose of the LORD thus revealing himself to Isaiah? What can we learn from it? It comes down to this: In the way the LORD prepared Isaiah for service as his prophet through this vision we are shown how the LORD prepares all his children for serving Him in thankfulness. A pattern is suggested of holiness, sinfulness, grace and then service.

What exactly did Isaiah see? He says he saw the LORD God himself sitting upon a throne. The language reminds us of other occasions when people “saw God” (Exodus 24:10; Ezekiel 1). Actually no one has ever seen God in the fullness of his glory. Not even the angels in his presence are able to do so! Isaiah says that he saw seraphs, six-winged angels. But even these sinless creatures who lived so close to God could not look directly upon the LORD, for with two wings they had to cover their faces. And no wonder, for Paul says that God dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). Further, with two they covered their feet. That suggests that they had to hide their creatureliness from the LORD. With the other two they flew.

As all this leaves a tremendous impression, there is also the calling of the seraphs to one another, “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*” This made quite an impression on Isaiah, for throughout his prophesy, Isaiah referred repeatedly to the holiness of the LORD.

When he saw the LORD in his splendour and heard the seraphs testify to God's holiness, Isaiah was impressed by his own sinfulness. That threefold call “*holy, holy, holy*” by the seraphs made it clear that God is “most holy.” Furthermore, the very word “holy” places the LORD in sharp contrast to man, who is the exact opposite of holy, that is, he is a sinner. For holiness points to the sinlessness of God. But it is impossible for a sinful man to stand in the presence of the sinless God. No wonder that Isaiah said, “*Woe to me! ... I am ruined.*” Isaiah was convinced of his own worthlessness, not by a detailed list of his sins but simply by seeing the LORD in his royal splendour. His holiness magnifies our sinfulness.

Isaiah felt totally disqualified to serve the LORD. But a remarkable thing happened. One of the seraphs came to him with a burning coal taken from the altar and touched Isaiah on the lips, declaring that his guilt was taken away, his sins atoned for. Here we see God's sovereign grace in Christ.

First of all, we see sovereign grace because this simply happened. Isaiah did not ask for it. He thought all was lost. Secondly, God's grace that came to him was “in Christ.” That is clear because the coals came from the altar. As New Testament believers when we hear of an altar then we think of our Lord Jesus Christ, for He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices. The mention of the purifying fire makes us think of the effect of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, as it purifies us from all our sins.

Notice what effect this had on Isaiah. One moment he exclaims “Woe to me!” But once his sins had been taken away, and he heard the question, “*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*” he stepped forward and volunteered himself. The removal of guilt emboldened Isaiah! At the same time, his experience of the holiness of God would always keep him humble. Nevertheless, it was

because Isaiah had first been confronted by God's holiness (to expose his sinfulness) and then by his grace that he was ready for the service the LORD had in mind for him.

Notice that pattern: holiness, sinfulness, grace, service. It reminds us of the pattern of the Catechism. What Isaiah's vision impresses upon us is that this threefold knowledge really begins with a sense of the holiness of God.

We need to reflect more often on the holiness of God. We need to think more about God, and less about ourselves. For, it is only the church overwhelmed by God's holiness that will be ready to say,

"LORD, here we are, ready to serve you."

E Kampen

© 2012

www.christianstudylibrary.org