

## I. Intro:

A. I was recently taken by the opening paragraph of a *Christianity Today* review of Michael Horton's new book, *Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears that Divide Us*

B. Horton is a seminary professor in California. The CT review, which was written by Kennedy, opened this way:

1. Fear, I have said to myself over the past two years, is what I'm having for breakfast. Anxiety, whether I like it or not, is the bread and butter that sustains me. I lather it on in the morning and sip it down at night. Even my sleep is interrupted by strange and garish dreams. I am not alone. I can't count the number of people I know who are dealing with unprecedented levels of anxiety. And when I look at my children and the world they are inheriting, well, other words crowd in, like *panic*.

C. Kennedy is not alone. Lots of people are stressed. Maybe you.

D. I think there's something to the theory – that I'm suddenly seeing written about everywhere - that one of the reasons children are so stressed is because they are picking it from their parents.

E. I've written about the Ambient Anger Index – and I think it's worth tracking – but anger is a secondary emotion. Part of the reason people are so unreasonable today is because they are anxious. They feel threatened. Maybe you?

F. There are lots of reasons you might be unsettled – on edge, drinking too much, engaging in some other unhelpful coping strategy.

1. There are the problems we share: Putin; inflation; our political dynamics; cyber security issues; state and federal debt levels.

2. But maybe those are not what populates your list. The things you find unsettling are personal. They deal with: your job or lack thereof; your marriage, our lack thereof; your health or the health of someone you love. Your kids.

G. We do not need to be told how or why to be anxious. It comes naturally.

H. I want to talk to those of you who are on edge, and I want to start a conversation about hope. I want to share God's strategy for your anxiety. It is, in a word. God.

I. The secret to the hope and joy we are promised in Scripture is not a formula, it's not a complicated insight. The secret to the hope and joy we are after – to the childlike carefree demeanor that trusts that things are under control – is a closer walk with God, which comes through knowing Him.

J. Men and women, as you know, there is a lot of advice out there about how to manage stress.

1. Some of it is helpful: limit your caffeine, get off social media, spend more time with friends, exercise.

2. Some of it is less reasonable: ignore what is going on; self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. And there is the rubber band method. This approach comes up from time to time. When you find yourself getting anxious you are supposed to snap the rubber band and say, "I will not be anxious." And then focus on relaxing all your muscles. It reminds me of the Jerry Seinfeld episode where ? and ? kept running around yelling, "serenity now."

K. There is a different way. Right size God. Conform your understanding to who He is by this book that reveals his nature. Every aspect of who God is changes things. In this four week series we are going to look at four aspects of God. Today, his holiness from Isaiah 6.<sup>1</sup>

II. **In the year that King Uzziah died:** When we come to passages like this, I often remind you that the Bible is historical. You never read, “a long time ago in a faraway land.” The Bible isn’t a fairy tale. It reads like history. In this section we also need to note that this was a stressful moment. Uzziah had been the king of Judah for fifty year – and he had done a good job. He was not perfect, but he had brought stability and prosperity to the kingdom. His death means this is a time of loss and instability for the Jews.

III. **In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.** So, Uzziah dies, and Isaiah the prophet, has a vision or is somehow escorted into Heaven.

IV. **I saw the Lord high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.** Isaiah is looking at God and he notes that He is magisterial. In fact, the train of his robe – this is the part that trails after him, dragging on the floor. It’s a thing with king’s robes and bride’s dresses. The general rule is, the more important the person, the longer the train. In this case, it’s so big it fills the room.

V. **V2: Above him were seraphim** – that is a special kind of angel - **each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces** – even though they were created for this task – to be in the presence of God, they could not handle the brilliance of God. His glory was too bright. You can only get so close the sun. **With two they covered their feet** (speaks to their creatureliness) **and with two they were flying.**

VI. **V3: And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”** There are several things to note here.

A. For starters, the word holy – *kadosh* in Hebrew, which means sacred and set apart - is problematic. It has a PR problem. These arise in part because holy is hard to define and in part because our sinful nature pushes back on it. But the net effect is, most of us think holiness lives at the intersection of “religious” and “no fun.” Holiness suggests boring rules enforced by self-righteous people we have no desire to hang out with. This is not in fact the case. Don’t buy the lie. Holy is good, fun, creative and life-giving. Sin is small, broken and boring. Sin is never as good as holy. Sin promises quick wins, but they never last, and they lead us down paths that end up taking without giving. They lead us into addictions because they demand more and more while delivering less and less. Our enemy has a brilliant marketing department, but his products are junk. Holiness is good. Holiness leads to joy. Holiness works.

B. The second thing to note is that in the Greek and Hebrew you emphasize a point by repeating the word.

1. It would be wrong to say that there are no adjectives and adverbs, but as a rule, the way something is highlighted is not by using the word “very” but by repeating the word you want to stress. So, we read things like Jesus saying, “Truly, truly I say to you.”

2. In his treatment of this text, I remember hearing RC Sproul note all kinds of different ways the pits in Genesis 14 were translated: big pits, deep pits, tar bits. The Hebrew said: pit pits.

3. All of that to note, you stress a point by repeating it. And, while a number of things get repeated twice, very few things get repeated three times.

a) The letter six does. Six, which highlights imperfection. Seven is whole and good. Six is noteworthy for not being seven. So, when we are looking for something that is very evil, we get the number 666.

b) The letter six does and so does the word “holy.” It is the only attribute of God that gets tripled. The angels in God’s presence are stressing God’s great righteousness. His perfection.

C. There is more. It’s worth noting that when we check in with these angels several thousand years later – in Revelation 4 - they are still at it.

1. In Revelation 4 we read about six winged creatures who – day and night without stop are saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

2. When people complain to me that the songs repeat to often – which can be a thing. I understand. But I am always thinking, “there seems to be some repetition going on in heaven.”

D. The gist of all of this is to note that God overwhelmingly holy. We live in a culture that is averse to the holy – to a God who will not tolerate people’s sin. A holy, righteous threatening God is unmodern. Isaiah’s big take-away when he is brought into the presence of God is that God is so holy that He redefines every situation. He is so beyond beyond and above above, so perfect, so absent of anything crooked, so absent of anything limiting, that everything is viewed differently in light of him, including our problems.

1. The God Isaiah meets overwhelms everything. He is not a God we trifle with or ignore or question. We might do these things before we meet him – indeed we do. And we see that in Scripture:

a) Job spends chapters demanding an audience with God – a chance to show God where God was wrong. When God finally shows up, Job takes one look and falls on his face.

2. And that is what we see here. Isaiah cannot stand. In the presence of God everything is different.

a) God is more holy than Isaiah can handle. He is not just wise, he has holy wisdom. He is not just just, He has a holy justice.

E. Isaiah is overwhelmed. **V4: At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me!” I cried.** A curse of woe is the worst prophecy that can be given. It was reserved for the most wicked. Isaiah calls it down on himself. His comparison of who He is next to God leads him to see his profound unholiness.

F. **“I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”**

1. Isaiah takes one look at God and melts. It is worth noting, Isaiah doesn't say, "Wow. This is amazing. Come look at this." He doesn't channel Crush, the surfer dude Sea Turtle in Finding Nemo. "This is awesome, man." He is like those people in Revelation 6 who want the mountains to fall on them so they can hide from God.

2. It is also worth noting that God does not, "Don't be so melodramatic. You're not that bad." He is going to have a coal from the altar used to touch Isaiah's lips in an act of atonement.

G. What is up with his lips? Why does he say he is a man of unclean lips?

1. Well, I think Tim Keller is right when he notes that Isaiah is in a panic because he is a prophet - a preacher, a pundit, a speaker. He is someone who makes his living with his lips. His lips are to him what fingers are to a pianist or speed is to Usain Bolt or the ability to throw the football is to Tom Brady. It is his strength.

2. But he no longer sees it as a strength. The holiness of God does not simply lead Isaiah to look at his sins and repent of those, but to look at his strengths and to repent of those.

3. He instantly comes to realize that the thing he thinks defines him - gives him value - is nothing.

4. He thought he was OK before God because he was a great preacher. He now realizes, his preaching is so far short of the mark that his whole identity is undone. He not only needs to repent of his sin, he needs to repent of his repentance.

5. We see the same thing happening to Paul in Romans 7. There we read about how he became a Christian. He was studying the Ten Commandments. He sees the command to not covet. He writes, the Law came and I died. What was his glue? In Paul's case he wasn't proud of his lips. He was proud of his moral rectitude. He was proud of how religious he was. And when he sees God that goes completely away.

6. For some of you, your identity is in your intelligence. For others its your professional skill, or your money or your looks. The reality is, our goodness is so far from good, that we not only need to repent of our sins, we need to repent of our strengths.

H. George Whitfield, one of the architects of the Great Awakening.

1. He is one of the members of the Holiness Club in Oxford with the Wesley brothers.

2. He becomes good friends with Benjamin Franklin, who was so enamored by his preaching - and his voice - that he wrote about both at some length.

3. In a sermon on Jeremiah 6:14 - which has the line, "Peace, peace," they say, but there is no peace. In response to this. George Whitfield says:

a) When a soul first gets a sight of God, it says, ‘I will reform, I will be mighty good’ – it tries to patch up a righteousness of its own to hide the nakedness it feels before God. But when a soul gets a full view of God, it realizes it never has and never will love God as He deserves to be loved with all the heart, soul, mind and strength – that even the best deeds, defiled and full of self-centeredness are they – that God will condemn you for the best prayer you ever set up – that your repentance needs to be repented of – and that all of your righteousness is that of a filthy rag. And that God must send them and you away if you bring them into Him in order to recommend you to His favor. Therefore, only before the face of God”, says Whitfield, “only a sight of God’s full holiness can bring you out of your self-righteousness, which is always the last idol taken out of your heart. Until you see it for what it is, you will not trust in Christ. You may turn to Him for help, you may make Him your example, but you will not trust in Him as Savior until you’ve repented for your righteousness.”<sup>2</sup>

VII. Let me take a step back to be sure you are tracking with me – because the solution I am offering has some wrinkles.

A. We are talking about hope. I am suggesting that the way forward is to right size God. I am saying that if you see Him for who He is, your problems will be put in perspective.

1. However, we are trading one problem for two others. Seeing God is going to help us understand our sin. And seeing God will lead us to be scared of God.

a) *That is not our only right emotion – He is loving and gracious. There is much that draws us to him. But He is so good that He overwhelms.*

b) *This is what we happened to the disciples in Mark 4. They were scared of the storm, until Jesus calmed it. Then they were scared of Jesus. Indeed, they are more frightened by Jesus than they were of the storm.*

c) *They realized, there was no reason to obsess over high winds and waves when the guy next to you can casually make them stop.*

2. Men and women, a right understanding of God will undo us. Reduce us. Stagger us.

3. We realize, He is infinitely greater than I am; infinitely greater than I can comprehend. In his presence my heart is revealed and I have nothing. I not only need to repent of my sin, I need to repent of my strengths. I have nothing to offer God. No ability to impress him. I have nothing.

B. And here is the problem - most of us do not have nothing.

1. That sounds like poor grammar. It is not. What we need is nothing. What we need is a right view of God and of ourselves, which makes it clear that we cannot fix our problem. All we need is nothing, but we keep bringing things.

2. Instead of seeing God’s holiness and repenting not only of our sin but also of our righteousness, we operate with an inflated view of ourselves and a diminished view of God and that translates into problems that we can’t fix.

- VIII. OK, so the time out is ending here. Back to our text.
- A. I have argued that the way forward is to right size God. I have then noted that when we do that, we trade one problem for another, because now we are not scared of our problems, we are undone with Christ.
  - B. The solution to that problem is to embrace God's grace. To stop trying to earn. To understand that He is the hero of this story.
  - C. There is another point that gets made in this passage.
- IX. In verse 6 we read: **Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."**
- A. He is being purified by a coal from the altar.
- X. **V8: Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"**
- XI. Please understand, this is not the initial call of Isaiah as a prophet. He had been serving as a prophet already. So, the ask here – whom shall I send? - is not to be a prophet. The ask here is to accept an assignment to a long hard run that will be full of rejection and failure.
- A. What Isaiah hears God say is, "I need a prophet who will go to people who will never listen to him. I need a prophet who will spend the next 30 years being ignored, despised, and ridiculed. Who will appear to be a failure. Who will get no professional affirmation. Is anyone up for this? And Isaiah says, "Here am I. Send me."
  - B. See, he is free. He is liberated from false issues.
    - 1. He is no longer scared of his problems or of "hard" in general. He is no longer ashamed to be perceived as a failure.
    - 2. He has already seen himself clearly. He has already seen himself with his limits and sin. And He knows that God accepts him. He is able to love and serve, because in the area that matters most he has failed and is loved. He doesn't have to earn or prove.
  - C. This orientation leads to courage. Resilience. Perspective. If God is for me – this holy, powerful God – why would I fear others.
  - D. I think the same thing is what happened to Paul. In I Corinthians he talks about a man called up to heaven – who saw things. God, or at least some of his glory. And after that he was unstoppable.
  - E. Men and women, the way to have hope – the solution to your anxiety, fear, concerns – is more of God.
    - 1. We need to right-size God.
    - 2. Today, we are thinking about his holiness.
    - 3. Do understand, we get more than we can process.
- XII. Many of you are living in the year Uzziah died. What we need is to look at God.
- A. We will see his holiness – and that will change us.
  - B. And we will see ourselves – and that will change us.

C. And we will see our problems in light of Him, and that will change our perspective.

XIII. We are going to sing *Holy, Holy, Holy*, this great 19<sup>th</sup> century hymn, which repeats Isaiah's repetition of God's brilliant perfection, his profound goodness. It notes that He is beyond beyond and above above and that through Christ He is for us and our problems are not problems. He has this under control. This is not a promise for an easy life. But it is assurance that He is working this out in light of eternity. Be encouraged.

XIV. And be pushing on ways that you – your family, your small group – can right-size God and help others do the same. It is the quickest and best ways to right-size our problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Two sources on this passage really helped / shaped me: 1) RC Sproul's book *The Holiness of God*; and 2) Tim Keller's sermon – The Holy One: His Holiness.

<sup>2</sup> This quote is from Keller's sermon.