

Our only hope before the Holy God is God himself.

Someone this week mentioned the vastness of the universe and it made me think of the last time I looked up at the night sky. And like usual I resolved to look up more! We are city people so we don't do it that often, but when there is little light coming from the ground and the expanse of stars before us, we can be in awe... a sense of wonder and even a little fear... here we are so small and so distant from what is laid before us as the tapestry of night.

There are many things that if we notice them can give us a sense of awe. If we can stop looking at ourselves long enough and we look in the right place at the right time we can be amazed. It just takes us positioning ourselves in front of them to gain that sense of being wonderstruck, the feeling of awe. But even the most stirring array of stars, or the vastness of the sea, any of the wonders we gaze upon, they are all hints of something bigger, something better and something more awesome.

We were created to stand before the creator of it all - to be awed, fearful, reverent before him. This is where we find out what is true of him and us so we position ourselves in front of God, under his Word and the vision that reveals his grandeur, his greatness, and his uniqueness. But it is not always a safe place - the closer you get the more your complete difference from him becomes dangerous.

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Isaiah 1:1-9

Our study of Scripture now brings us here, to the prophet Isaiah, it is not unlike one of the wonders of the world, standing before it we might see its vastness and shiver! It is a vision of the holiness of God, and his grace towards us who could never earn salvation. It is a promise of a rescuer who will come and take our place, save us, give us pure hearts and real life.

Isaiah's ministry unfolds as a message for Judah and Jerusalem, among other nations during the reign of kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah - 740 B.C. to 680 or so...

The history of God and his people Israel has been unfolding and Isaiah is in the midst of a pivotal time - one that brings significant warning but also great hope. There were twelve tribes of the Jews that came into the Promised Land from Egypt and they settled throughout the land and had a succession of Judges that led the people.

But influenced by the surrounding people groups, they craved a king and they got one. First Saul and then the anointed young King David, the one to unite the tribes into a kingdom and

promised to forever have an heir on the throne. His son Solomon would lead with wisdom and Israel would flourish.

But just one generation later the nation splits in two, 10 northern tribes move their capital to Samaria and reject the worship of God, while two tribes keep Jerusalem as the political and religious center of Judah.

During the life of Isaiah, Israel the northern kingdom will be defeated by the Assyrians and Judah remains as the nation set apart for God and this vision is a collection of experiences meant to call people back to God, to uncover the way things really work and to reveal hope for all people.

Certainly for Judah (and other nations) but also for us - part of the human story, part of the redemptive story God has been writing since the beginning. This message is good news for bad people like us.

In these first verses, we see a framework of what is to come in our study.

God is holy, we are incapable apart from him, and he is our hope.

1) The Holy God

As we come to this text, and if it was the first we have heard these things, we would notice there are a few players here - of course, Isaiah as this is his vision, but then someone called "Lord" and apart from him a "sinful nation."

Here we have the name of God translated as Lord, this is the creator of the universe, the One who chose a people for himself and from a promise made to a guy staring at the stars has directed, cared for, rescued and established Israel.

"The Lord has spoken... the Holy One of Israel..." Who is this Holy God that Isaiah speaks of?

We have to be honest, the holiness of God is not a common conversational piece. Even in the church, we talk of grace and the goodness of God with regularity, but his holiness?

Maybe it is because we don't really know what it means!

If we keep studying Scripture we begin to recognize what it means that God is Holy. That he is different, set apart from others. He is beyond other deities, above them and us. He is unique, there is none like him, none that matches him. He alone is perfect, pure.

The word holiness “signifies everything about God that sets him apart from us and makes him an object of awe, adoration, and dread to us. It covers all aspects of his transcendent greatness and moral perfection and thus is an attribute of all his attributes, pointing to the “Godness” of God at every point. Every facet of God’s nature and every aspect of his character may properly be spoken of as holy, just because it is his. The core of the concept, however, is God’s purity, which cannot tolerate any form of sin and thus calls sinners to constant self-abasement in his presence.” J.I. Packer

It's helpful to think of God like the sun. The sun is so bright and powerful that its energy radiates out through the solar system. The source of all life, powerful, and unique. Taken further you can think of the whole area around the sun as holy because of its proximity to the source. The closer you get to the sun the more tense it gets... It's a good, helpful thing to be within the sun's energy, but the sun itself is so powerful that it's dangerous to get too close.

The same paradox exists with God, his holiness is so pure that impurity can't exist... Through Scripture we see this playing out, people can't get close because God's holy presence is a blazing reality and even the smallest of violations of his holiness can't stand - so God gives clear instructions for worship for ritual purity that people can even approach the Holy One of Israel.

“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in him.” -- **1 John 1:5** (CSB) ...the image is affirming God's holy purity, which makes fellowship between him and the willfully unholy impossible...”

Here is the central character in this unfolding vision of Isaiah, the Holy God. He is the One that all of creation is meant to point to, to stir you to think about, to recognize his power, his uniqueness.

We so often imagine God in our own likeness, sharing our defining personality traits, our indifference, our preferences. But the Bible paints the picture of a blazing fire.

And if his holiness means he is light and there is no darkness in him... what does it mean for us? How can we relate? How do we live before this Holy God?

Everyone in Scripture that stands before the Holy God falls to the ground in reverence. His holiness to us is humbling whoa. And it is meant to be so for Judah who is on trial in Isaiah 1. Like them, all of humanity on trial, this is us. God has given direction, a pattern of life and worship but in renegade disobedience, we keep falling, we can't live up to his holiness.

2) Our Inability

The Holy God speaks, “I have raised up children and they have rebelled against me. This is God as a father, and his children break his heart by turning from him toward lesser things. “What

wounds the heart of God is that we are as rebellious against him as we are blessed by him.”
Ortlund

There is nothing flattering about it, we are dumb. The ox knows its owner, the donkey its master's feeding trough... but my people don't understand.

We can't for a second think this is only describing Israel as the chosen nation - it is, and they have had clear communication of what it means to worship God, but this is the cure of all of humanity and you and I are just as guilty apart from God. Incapable of understanding, to know our owner and humbly bow before him.

We are “people weighed down with iniquity, brood of evildoers, depraved children! They have abandoned the Lord; they have despised the Holy One of Israel; they have turned their backs on him.” -- **Isaiah 1:4** (CSB)

From the garden at the beginning, the smallest of acts shouts loudly of abandoning the Holy God in pursuit of being like him ourselves. And from the bite of fruit, curse entered the pure reality of creation. From that small act in the close orbit of God, every wretched thing found existence. Cancer, murder, lust, anger, greed, hatred, pride, rape, violence, slavery, abuse... and the whole lot of vile things pervade. And we, meant for something better are weighed down with sin, depraved.

“Every sin is an act of cosmic treason, a futile attempt to dethrone God in His sovereign authority.” RC Sproul

Like our first parents in the garden, and every parent since, we have abandoned the Lord, despising his name, his way, his glory.

“There is no one righteous, not even one. 11 There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away; all alike have become worthless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one.” -- **Romans 3:10-12** (CSB) “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” -- **Romans 3:23** (CSB)

And we can't stop it, because we don't realize the damage being done!

“Why do you want more beatings? Why do you keep on rebelling?
The whole head is hurt, and the whole heart is sick. 6 From the sole of the foot even to the head, no spot is uninjured —wounds, welts, and festering sores not cleansed, bandaged, or soothed with oil.” -- **Isaiah 1:5-6** (CSB)

You are so beat up and you don't recognize that what you are doing is killing you. You haven't even figured out how to care for the wounds.

This makes me think of cigarette ads in the fifties. “Good for your health!” So convinced that it is worthwhile and yet with each breath, the body is being ruined...

What can't fall into this category?! All of the stuff we think will finally solve the pain, or rid us of the problem and with each sip, with each endeavor we go deeper into despair. “Sin creates in us a desire for more sin, and there is no bottom to it.”

And if we can remove the reality of a Holy God, we don't have to worry about a thing. We just turn our backs on him.

Most people in our day don't believe they will collapse before a holy God... We don't grasp his otherness... we waste time consumed with lesser things not the fact that you will see him, you will be in his presence one day and it will be the most intense moment of your existence.

And this only brings destruction. The image of what is to come, the burned-out cities, destroyed by foreign enemies. Fields devoured. Abandoned. The ghost town life becomes apart from God. Deserving punishment like that of Sodom and Gomorrah - utter destruction.

This is clearly not self-esteem Sunday. This is us, rebels, weighed down by sin and despising the Holy One of Israel, that he would even call us to something better. A hard place to be, face to face with ourselves.

“Isaiah begins with life-giving conviction of sin. It's our first step back to God... Conviction of sin is the lance of the divine Surgeon piercing the infected soul, releasing the pressure, letting the infection pour out. Conviction of sin is a health-giving injury. Conviction of sin is the Holy Spirit being kind to us by confronting us with the light we don't want to see and the truth we are afraid to admit and the guilt we prefer to ignore. Conviction of sin is the severe love of God overruling our compulsive dishonesty, our willful blindness, our favorite excuses. Conviction of sin is the violent sweetness of God opposing the sins lying comfortably undisturbed in our lives. Conviction of sin is the merciful God declaring war on the false peace we settle for. Conviction of sin is our escape from malaise to joy, from attending church to worship, from faking it to authenticity.” Ortlund

The point of these verses in Isaiah is not only judgment, it is not only a catalog of the mistakes of Judah and humanity. It is an invitation to something different. Turning from our despising back to the Holy God. Recognizing our inability to live, and seeking him. An invitation to repentance.

“I now rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance. For you were grieved as God willed, so that you didn't experience any loss from us. 10 For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, but worldly grief produces death.”
-- **2 Corinthians 7:9-10** (CSB)

“Repentance is not simply feeling sorry for what we’ve done or confessing where we’ve failed. Nor is it simply resolving to do better. Rather, repentance is turning back to God in all of life. If sin is running from God to get control of our lives, then repentance is turning back to God and yielding control to him.” Wilbourne Rankin

But if I am incapable... if I don’t understand... if I am dumber than a donkey, what do I do? Your hope is not sourced in you, it is solely in the Holy One of Israel.

3) God is our only Hope

We find hope first in Isaiah’s name. Literally “Yahweh is salvation,” The Lord saves. Everyone who first heard Isaiah recount his vision would see him coming a mile away. “Here comes the Lord Saves... I wonder what’s on his mind?!”

The point, even in his name, is that God is working salvation for those that turn to him.

And this salvation is realized through a remnant, and it was his plan all along.

“If the Lord of Armies had not left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would resemble Gomorrah.” -- **Isaiah 1:9** (CSB)

Judgment and punishment would be ours if the Holy God did not leave a remnant for us - a faithful line that is realized in Jesus. He is the ultimate remnant of one, and then the remnant is expanded to include Christ’s people - those he claims as his own.

While humanity is unable to stand before the Holy God, he comes himself to live in our place as the obedient son, never breaking the heart of the Father. He dies in our place taking on our guilt and wrath against our despising God. And he wins, he comes out of the grave proving his name - Yeshua “God saves.”

“For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. 5 He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One.

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ 10 as a plan for the right time — to bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth in him.

11 In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will, 12 so that

we who had already put our hope in Christ might bring praise to his glory.” -- **Ephesians 1:4-12 (CSB)**

This is the promise of Isaiah, this is our hope. And it is in Christ that we are made holy, empowered to live holy lives reflecting the One who owns us.

“God saves sinners. *God* - the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father’s will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of the Father and Son by renewing. *Saves* - does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory; plans achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. *Sinners* - men *and women* as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, blind, unable to lift a finger to do God’s will or better their spiritual lot. *God saves sinners...* Sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but salvation, first and last, whole and entire, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory forever, amen!” Packer

“God is announcing to us through Isaiah, The Lord, for all that he is, saves, for all that’s worth, sinners, for all that we need. The truth is better than we give it credit for... Conviction of sin, with the forgiveness of Jesus pouring over our wounds, is life.” Ortlund

What now?

This is the question on which our existence hangs. Whether we are banking on God’s promises of salvation or on the empty promises of the false salvations we or the world contrive. If we are not letting God save us, we are exposing ourselves to forces of evil, more than we know. But as the truth of “The Lord saves” breaks upon us with prophetic clarity, it becomes a powerful resource for living.

Find Your Whoa - be humbled before the Holy God. Look up. See him in his word. Don’t cheapen the reality of who God is.

Cling to Jesus - our hope our salvation. Believe in him. That he lived, died and rose for you. That you are united to him, that promise that “the Lord saves” has been realized in your life by the work of Jesus for you.

And keep clinging to him when you start acting like a heartsick rebel. Have you heard about “Justin Beaver?” A beaver kit was left without its colony, its family so a nice lady rescued and adopted it. Incapable of living in the wild so she brought JB into her home. Being a beaver he started collecting things around the house and making dams. He chews on the woodwork... he beavs. Like Justin Beaver, we have been rescued but we don’t always remember our new identity and we fall back into sin, back into looking to things other than God for purpose or comfort.

“Sin creates in us a desire for more sin, and there is no bottom to it. There’s only one object of worship that gives *to us* rather than takes from us—that is Jesus Christ.” Ben Brophy

It is upon Christ we rely, the One who upholds the universe by the power of his word. God is the One who acts, in whom all things exist, and our relation to our creator is meant to be one of universal, absolute, and unceasing dependence.

So back we go, over and over again to our source, to the One powerful enough to save. To the Holy One of Israel.

There is always hope - and his name is Jesus. This hope is headed somewhere, not to desolation, not to the besieged city, but to the city of Christ, our home with the Holy God.

“the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the city’s main street. The tree of life was on each side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations, 3 and there will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 Night will be no more; people will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, because the Lord God will give them light, and they will reign forever and ever.” --

Revelation 22:1-5 (CSB)