

GOING FOR HOLINESS

SESSIONS AND SUPPLEMENTS



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Jesus My All to Heaven Is Gone

John Cennick

*Jesus, my All, to heav'n is gone,
He that I placed my hopes upon;
His track I see, and I'll pursue
The narrow way, till Him I view.*

*The way the holy prophets went,
The road that leads from banishment,
The King's highway of holiness,
I'll go, for all the paths are peace.*

*No stranger may proceed therein,
No lover of the world and sin;
No lion, no devouring care,
No ravenous tiger shall be there.*

*No, nothing may go up thereon
But traveling souls, and I am one;
Wayfaring men to Canaan bound,
Shall only in the way be found.*

*Nor fools, by carnal men esteem,
Shall err therein; but they redeem'd
In Jesu's blood, shall show their right
To travel there, till Heav'n's in sight.*

*This is the way I long have sought,
And mourn'd because I found it not;
My grief, my burden, long have been,
Because I could not cease from sin.*

*The more I strove against its pow'r,
I sinn'd and stumbled but the more;
Till late I heard my Saviour say,
"Come hither, soul, for I'm the way."*

*Lo! glad I come; and Thou, dear Lamb,
Shalt take me to Thee, as I am;
Nothing but sin I Thee can give;
Yet help me, and Thy praise I'll live.*

*I'll tell to all poor sinners round,
What a dear Saviour I have found;
I'll point to Thy redeeming blood,
And say, "Behold the way to God."*

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SESSION 1

HOLY FOR NOTHING Isaiah 40:1-31

Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Frost. Many poets have left their mark on this world. But none is quoted as often as that great poet...Anonymous.

I quote a short anonymous poem derived from Isaiah 40 where the prophet says people are grass. The four-line poem imagines a horse, his master, and a pastor.

“The steed bit his master:
How came this to pass?
He heard the good pastor
Cry, ‘All flesh is grass.’”

If I wrote that, I would want to be anonymous.

Isaiah left a mark on this world that has lasted for three millennia. Not bad for a blade of grass.

The New Testament quotes Isaiah over 60 times, second only to the book of Psalms. Isaiah served some 700 years before Christ. Assyria was on the rise militarily. Israel was in terrible shape spiritually. God patiently called them to repent and offered comfort rooted in truth.

We will see him do that in Isaiah 40. This passage might evoke for you Handel’s “Messiah” and the movie “Chariots of Fire.” We will cover the chapter in five main points. I will be reading from the New International Version.

I. GOD GIVES COMFORT

See Isaiah 40:1-5. “‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’S hand double for all her sins.’ A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

God called Israel to be his holy people. They went through all the motions at the temple, but their hearts turned to idols of wood, stone, money, military alliances, and political power.

Long after Isaiah died, God sent the tribes of the Southern Kingdom of Judah to Babylon. Isaiah 40 comforts the faithful few of Judah with a picture of the end of the Babylonian exile. The message is that God rules but he does not rush. Isaiah 40:2 tells

Judah: “her hard service has been completed.” The hard service ended about 200 years after Isaiah wrote. God takes the long view and takes his time.

Get a sense of that scale. If we look back 200 years from 2024, what do we find? Beethoven’s 9th Symphony premiered. A Pennsylvania newspaper took the first presidential election poll and reported that Andrew Jackson had a clear lead. Three months later, he lost. John Quincy Adams won. By the way, newspapers reported that Adams did not wear underwear and went to church barefoot! If that paper correctly predicted the results of the 2024 presidential election we would be impressed.

God takes his time and will not let people push him. In Isaiah 5:18-19 Isaiah proclaimed: “Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes, to those who say, ‘Let God hurry; let him hasten his work so we may see it. The plan of the Holy One of Israel—let it approach, let it come into view, so we may know it.’”

Isaiah heard the seraphs cry that God is “holy, holy, holy.” They did not demand that God “hurry, hurry, hurry.”

God works at his pace. In Isaiah 46:13, he tells Judah: “my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed.” He speaks of King Cyrus of Persia who let the exiles return 200 years later. God cares more about direction than speed. He took centuries to get Judah to the holy place he wanted them to be. Keeping that in mind, consider four questions.

A. QUESTION 1

How long are we willing to wait and work to get a local church body to the healthy, holy places God wants it to be? The American evangelical church often has looked for quick fixes. We cannot be God’s holy people by being in a hurry. We must take time for his word. We must learn to wait on him in prayer, alone and together. P. T. Forsyth wrote: “The waiting energy of the Church is just as faithful as its forward movements, and at certain times more needful.” The book of Acts shows us the church was born in a waiting room as they pondered the gospel and prayed.

B. QUESTION 2

How do we approach God’s word for comfort? Do we look only for immediately satisfying verses? Or, do we take comfort from learning about, and leaning on, God’s long-term plans?

God comforts the people with a picture of what he would do for their descendants at the end of the exile. He says he has his plan for the nation and will fulfill it.

We often we seek comfort for ourselves and for the present in God’s word. But do we seek comfort from God’s plan for the whole church?

The people of Judah had the Assyrians approaching when Isaiah preached about the exiles distant return from Babylon. It is easy to imagine the people saying, “a lot of good that does me today.”

Suppose you or I are having a hard week. Someone says to us, “Fear not. Take comfort. Jesus said ‘I will build my church.’” We too might say “a lot of good that does me today.”

But it can. It puts our problems in perspective. God guarantees are glorious eternity for all his saved ones. That promise does not make it easy to endure hardship and loss. Paul knew that. But it provides context for our hardships.

C. QUESTION 3

How do we approach church ministry? If we try to grow the church by emphasizing short-term benefits, we create a climate in which people do not connect with God’s grand plans. We deprive them of the ability to contextualize their immediate problems and advantages in the overarching grandeur of being God’s people.

D. QUESTION 4

How do we preach comfort? Isaiah links comfort with judgment. The primary comfort is that God saves sinners from judgment for himself. Preaching comfort is not the same as preaching only comfortable stuff.

Try to name one prophet, apostle, preacher or pastor in the Bible who said only comfortable things and thought only of happiness in the moment? Today we hear that you can have “Your Best Life Now.” You, you, you. Now, now, now. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

No biblically sound ministry offers comfort without confronting the issue of sin God’s holy judgment.

Isaiah says Judah “has received double” for her sins. Does that mean that the Southern Kingdom deserved 35 years of exile but God gave them 70 years? No.

The Hebrew term can refer to folding something double so that the parts come together. Picture reading a book to the end and then closing it. The phrase is a Hebrew poetic expression of completion. God closed the exile book only after his plan bore the fruit he wanted.

II. GOD GIVES A COMMISSION

See Isaiah 40:6-9. “A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ ‘All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.’ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news

to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!' "

People do not like to be told they are like dying flowers and dry grass. But the comfort message starts with the fact that our glory is passing and pathetic by comparison to God's glory.

Turn to Isaiah 53. About 700 years after Isaiah wrote, John the Baptist referred to Isaiah 40. John announced that God was prepping the greatest possible rescue.

Isaiah looked ahead centuries and saw Jesus do that rescue work. See Isaiah 53:4-6. "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Note the uncomfortable vocabulary in this statement about the best good news ever: pain, suffering, punished, stricken, afflicted, pierced, crushed, wounds, iniquity, transgressions. We must declare that God the Son paid a hard price for our sins, died and was buried. He rose from the dead and bodily ascended to heaven as King of kings. He will return and set the world right.

Sinners must ask him for full pardon and a whole new life. He will give his perfect record of righteousness and a new kind of life to anyone who humbly asks him for salvation. I did that long ago and I received salvation. Have you? If you have not yet, why not now?

III. GOD GATHERS LAMBS

See Isaiah 40:10-11. "See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

Steel is strong but is hard and cold. The living, omnipotent God carries his rescued ones close to his heart. His warm, welcoming heart for us beats even in his call to repent. Jesus told the lukewarm church in Laodicea, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline."

IV. GOD'S SPOKESMAN GIVES 3 QUIZZES AND SAYS "NOTHING" IN BETWEEN

The Jewish people of Isaiah's day liked to make idols because all sinners want to make God as they want God to be.

Take this bear as an example of making what you want. This bear is from the Build-A-Bear workshop. My grandkids have gone there and made the bears they wanted, as did the person from the camp who kindly loaned me this one. At Build-A-Bear, you leave out the parts you don't like. No problem.

The people of Israel, however, attended the Build-A-God workshop. Big problem.

The true God simply is. He is a given. He is not a product of our desires. We cannot make a living bear and we cannot make a living God.

No sinner will build a properly holy God. But his holiness is essential. The book of Isaiah calls God “the Holy One” 29 times.

A. QUIZ 1

A fake god is a real problem so Isaiah gives remedial doses of reality in some quiz questions. Start with Isaiah 40:12-14. “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge, or showed him the path of understanding?”

Scientists have a good idea of the weight of the water in all of earth’s seas. The number of tons is 145 quintillion (145 followed by 18 zeros). Every zero increases the previous number ten times! To God, all that tonnage is less than the water I hold in my palm.

As for stars, people have a hard time even helping us grasp the size of just our Milky Way galaxy. One attempt says to imagine we are making a scale model of the Milky Way. A United States quarter represents the size of our whole solar system’s orbit around the sun. In that scale, the Milky Way would be the size of...the United States. Isaiah tells us that God can palm *all* the galaxies.

When Isaiah wrote, the world had never seen a mass return of a people from exile. God wants them to know he is fully qualified for the job.

B. ISAIAH SAYS “NOTHING”

See Isaiah 40:15-17. “Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.”

The Assyrians and Babylonians thought their kingdoms were glorious. Now their glory is mostly dust or buried. Snippets appear in museums. God still rules.

J. R. Vassar writes about chapter 40 and others like it. “These texts are warnings given to kings and nations who can’t do the math of the universe and have miscalculated their significance and power to the intentional neglect of ascribing to God his immeasurable value. They rejoice in the work of their hands, the brilliance of their plans, and the displays of their power, intentionally oblivious and indifferent to the surpassing

greatness, brilliance, and power of God. Imagine attending the 2014 New Year's fireworks show in Dubai, which, at a cost of nearly six million dollars, was the largest the world had ever seen. As you gaze into the sky in amazement, feeling the rumblings in your chest from the explosions, some kid yanks on your pant leg and tries to sell you a ticket for a viewing of the Roman candle he is about to set off. He's cute, but he's confused and has missed the point. His Roman candle is laughable and will barely be visible in the glow of six million dollars' worth of fireworks. This is what God is getting at and what the prophet Isaiah is helping us see. We are the glory hogs with our little Roman candles; God's just a realist."

C. QUIZ 2

See Isaiah 40:18-21. "With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot; they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple. Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?"

It is so embarrassing when your god topples over and can't get up. God-rot is the worst. We serve Jesus, true God and true human. He walked out of his tomb. He never saw decay and never will.

D. ISAIAH SAYS "NOTHING" AGAIN

See Isaiah 40:22-24. "He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff."

That chaff includes presidents and all politicians, whether Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Green, No Labels, Know Nothings, Federalists, Whigs or whatnot. Pray for all such leaders, but do not make a god of any of them.

E. QUIZ 3

See Isaiah 40:25-28. "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God'? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom."

J. A. Motyer points to the Hebrew grammar in Verse 25. “*The Holy One* is here an adjective without the definite article, as though ‘Holy’ were another name for the Lord: ‘Holy keeps saying’.”

The word holy basically means “*separate*.” God simply is set apart. He is greater than any existing being or any conceivable being. You cannot improve him. He cannot improve himself because God is perfect. He is self-existent. His knowledge, wisdom, power are perfect. He is morally perfect.

The title of this sermon is “Holy for Nothing” because verse 25 shows us the gracious activity of “Holy” for nothing people and nations. Motyer comments, “The wrong inference from God’s transcendence is that he is too great to care; the right one is that he is too great to fail.”

V. GOD GIVES STRENGTH

Finish the passage with Isaiah 40:29-31. “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

The faithful remnant did find strength in God as they waited. So did the returning exiles.

I have never been exiled to Babylon but I have been a weary pilgrim and pastor. Years ago, Leadership magazine had a one-panel cartoon with a man replying to a woman on a bus. He said, “No mam, I’m not a pastor. I’ve just been ill for a few days.” I identify.

Years ago, I had just landed at a church as the new senior pastor. Finishing up the previous ministry, finding a place to live, moving, settling our children in school, and more were quite draining. I did not realize how depleted I was as I entered the complex, challenging situation. Expectations were high and my energy crashed. Soon I was exhausted. The elders wisely allowed me to focus just on preaching and a few other core items for some months.

How would I tell that to the pastoral staff I had to lead? I read Isaiah 40 to them and told them the best I could do for a bit was walk.

I waited on God. He gave me grace and strength in his time. Within that first year, he gave me some occasions to fly. Perhaps the best was when I baptized 72 people in one day.

Even if I did not get to fly in any ministry, the Lord was still worth serving. I learned to live the words I had often sung:

“I hear the Savior say,
 ‘Thy strength indeed is small!
 Child of weakness watch and pray.
 Find in me thine all in all.”

Jesus knows the hardship of ministry. In Isaiah 49:4-6, the ultimate Servant says: “I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’S hand, and my reward is with my God. And now the LORD says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am¹ honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—he says: ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Jesus reached this Gentile in 1972 and has sustained me through decades of service.

Rest in him whether you feel weak, strong, or a mix. Do it always. The holy God is for us. He made us nothings to be his people and that is something.

*Sing praise to God Who reigns above, the God of all creation,
The God of power, the God of love, the God of our salvation.
With healing balm my soul is filled and every faithless murmur stilled:
To God all praise and glory.*

*What God’s almighty power hath made His gracious mercy keepeth,
By morning glow or evening shade His watchful eye ne’er sleepeth;
Within the kingdom of His might, Lo! all is just and all is right:
To God all praise and glory.*

*The Lord is never far away, but through all grief distressing,
An ever present help and stay, our peace and joy and blessing.
As with a mother’s tender hand, God gently leads the chosen band:
To God all praise and glory.*

*Thus, all my toilsome way along, I sing aloud Thy praises,
That earth may hear the grateful song my voice unwearied raises.
Be joyful in the Lord, my heart, both soul and body bear your part:
To God all praise and glory.*

*Let all who name Christ’s holy Name give God all praise and glory;
Let all who own His power proclaim aloud the wondrous story!
Cast each false idol from its throne, for Christ is Lord, and Christ alone:
To God all praise and glory.*

SESSION 2

WHAT DO YOU SAY? Isaiah 6:1-8

I was in 8th grade and had to use the bathroom. Since class was in session and the teacher ran out of hall passes, he watched as I went down the hall. Neither of us realized what lurked inside the bathroom.

I walked smack into six guys were skipping classes. They were well known trouble makers. I was just the type they liked to menace. One asked me, "Aren't you afraid to be in here with us?"

What do you say to something like that? I choose the answer "no." They saw through the lie and encircled me. Suddenly, one punched my stomach and I doubled over. I knew I had to get out of that bathroom. Hey, when you gotta go....

Only one guy stood between me and the door. I used my new, low center of gravity. I hit his gut with my head and knocked him out of the way. I got through the door and they pursued me. The teacher nabbed the bunch.

Another day in another place a guy I never saw before walked up to me. He got in my face and flicked open a switchblade. He said, "Someone is going to bleed. Is it going to be you?"

What do you say to something like that? Again, I chose "no." Satisfied with just scaring me, he left and I never saw him again.

I could relate other incidents but those two will suffice. I see two upsides. First, they were not common occurrences. Second, they were good preparation for congregational business meetings. I kid. Though at times...

It's time for us to shift to a day 27 centuries before my teen years. Turn to Isaiah 6. Isaiah met the ultimate threatening presence. He could not bluff like I did. Unlike me, he answered "yes" to the one who bothered him.

I am usually a 3-point kind of preacher. I hit you with 5 points last time in a sermon covering all 31 verses of Isaiah 40. This time I will cover just the first 8 verses of Isaiah 6 and use...7 points! Why? I am following the main action verbs.

I. I SAW (1-2)

Look at Isa 6:1-2. Isaiah says, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying."

Uzziah had enjoyed a long reign of 53 years. He was a good king. When he went, his people lost a valued source of political stability and spiritual direction.

The seraphs are heavenly beings in God's high court. They hover above him in the vision but no being outranks God. One king was dead. God is always on the throne.

Isaiah saw the Lord, but all he mentions is the throne, the robe, the seraphs, and the temple. He saw God's glory in the whole spectacle. He did not see the very essence of God. Even if the seraphs did not cover their faces, they could not see God's essence.

God gave this vision to Isaiah to teach him about long-term reality in a time of national loss. Americans might go to a movie or watch TV to escape a political outcome they do not like. Isaiah tuned into the ultimate reality show. He saw that God is King of kings.

II. THEY WERE CALLING (3-4)

Next see Isa 6:3-4. "And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."

The seraphs do not cry out any number of things true of God. They do not emphasize that God is "Love, love, love." That line is from the Beatles, not the seraphs. Nor do they cry, "Ominipotent, omnipotent, omnipotent." Nor, "Wise, wise, wise." They stress that God is "holy, holy, holy." In the book of Isaiah, God is often called holy. It is key to understanding God.

When was the last time God's holiness was the topic of a conversation you had with someone from a church body? American evangelicals do not often remind one another that God is holy, holy, holy. We should.

The word holy basically means "separate." God is not an angel on steroids. He is a separate kind of being. He is not a creature, but is creator. He is greater than any existing being or conceivable being. You cannot improve him. He cannot improve himself because God is perfect. He is self-existent. His knowledge, wisdom, power are perfect. He is morally perfect.

III. I CRIED (5)

See Isaiah 6:5 where Isaiah speaks up. "Woe to me!" I cried. "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." He sees and comes unglued.

You might have seen the 1947 short film "Tubby the Tuba." He was an outsider. Then he played his simple tune. The other instruments liked it and asked, "Please Tubby, may we sing your song too?" Isaiah is not like them. He does not say to the seraphs: "Let me join your cry of holy, holy, holy." He cries out: "Woe to me!"

He also does not say, “Good for me, I have seen God and I will be his prophet.” He sees God as the ultimate menacing presence.

I found the bathroom guys menacing because they were bad guys. Isaiah found God menacing because God is good. Isaiah suddenly saw himself as a non-obvious bad guy. He was probably more upright than most folks in Israel and Judea. But they were not in the display at the moment. They did not afford him comforting comparisons.

Isaiah diagnoses himself and his people with a case of leper lips. At least Isaiah did not make excuses. He saw smoke, but he did not blow smoke.

Maybe Isaiah swore at times. Maybe he lied here and there. Perhaps he gossiped, unfairly criticized others, flattered people, or boasted. Maybe he spoke disrespectfully about people in authority. Perhaps he complained about God’s providence and provisions. I had done all of those things by the time I was in 8th grade. My lips were not the only tainted part of me. My heart was unholy.

IV. HE SAID (6-7)

Look at Isaiah 6:6-7. “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’”

The seraph does not presume to touch the altar directly. He uses tongs to get the coal from the holy spot. He then handles the hot coal directly.

Perhaps you sat by a fire pit when a burning log shot out a live ember. I’ll bet you did not use it as Chapstick. This temple vision does not say we should use live coals as lip balm. The point is that God provides forgiveness as our platform for ministry.

V. I HEARD (8A)

See the first part of Isaiah 6:8: “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!’”

The singular word “I” and the plural word “us” reflect the truth that the one true God exists eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The cry “Holy, holy, holy” is fitting for the one God who exists in three divine persons.

This glorious God asks, “Who will go?” Isaiah is a better man than I am. I would be tempted to say: “Send the seraphs. They have feet and wings!” Isaiah responded positively.

VI. I SAID (8B)

See v8 again. “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!’”

He said yes to the mission voiced by the holy menace. Because of grace alone, he stopped saying, “Woe to me” and said “send me.”

Saving grace is sending grace for us too. We are not prophets like Isaiah. But God calls all saved servants to make his glory known.

Service is always rooted in salvation. It is no use telling God “Send me” unless your sin has sent you to God’s remedy.

I had been asked to preach at a funeral service for someone I knew. The widower only gave me one directive: “Preach the gospel.” The service was in a church that had a liberal pastor. He welcomed me as a colleague before the service. Then he began to tell me what a great pastor he was. I hoped a lightning bolt did not hit the office. After I preached the gospel, he was quite cold to me. He did not like the message of grace remedied wrath. For him, the pastorate was an occupation he mastered. For me, it was a stewardship based in salvation. That is what Scripture says it always is.

For us, the coal that touches our lips is the cross that touches our hearts. The work of Christ alone enables us to do any work for Christ. Undeserved pardon took Isaiah from “woe” to “go.” Same with us.

VII. WHAT DO YOU SAY?

A. HAVE YOU SAID “WOE”?

The first is, “Have you seen your sin for what it is and have cried ‘Woe to me’ before the Holy God?”

Listen to Jesus in Lk 12:4-5. “I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” He does not mean fear Satan. Jesus means fear God who will throw Satan into hell.

Jesus did not teach that guys with switchblades should not bother us in the least. He meant that we give too much weight to hooligans but make light of holiness. We should be deeply impressed with our sin. We should be most deeply impressed with God’s right to judge sin and his merciful choice to provide its remedy.

In Isaiah 8:11-13 the prophet tells us how God told him to think about God: “This is what the LORD says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people: ‘Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.’”

C. S. Lewis wrote, “What do people mean when they say ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good’? Have they never even been to a dentist?” I had a great

dentist. To put me right, he had to do hard things in my mouth. Jesus sometimes has to do hard things in the hearts and lives of his church. Lips too.

Many people talk about God unconditionally accepting us. Why do so few say we must unconditionally accept God? Do not try to edit out his wrath and holiness. It will fail. He is what he is. We must praise him for all his attributes and acts.

God is a sanctuary to anyone who first sees his holiness as the most threatening presence and then trusts his provision of holy salvation as the most wonderful gift.

God the Son came into this world and lived a holy, holy, holy life. He died as the perfect sacrifice for our sin on his cross. He rose bodily from the dead and ascended to the highest throne room.

You cannot remove your guilt or even help remove it. You must ask him to apply the hot coal of the cross to your heart. It will take away your guilt and give you the Lord's gift of a holy standing before the throne. It will start to change you so you walk in holy paths more and more. In the end it will usher you into glory in a resurrection body.

I asked for that treatment in my teens. God saved me by his holy grace. Have you?

B. DO YOU SAY "YES" TO GOING FOR HOLINESS?

By "going for holiness" I mean two things. First, I mean pursuing sanctification as a saved person. Second, I mean serving God in the way that fits your gifting and opportunities.

Start with growing more holy as saved people. Some well-meaning believers think that making rules is the way to go. Some create laws where God has not.

I have a book written in the 1920s that said hot dog roasts were leading youth astray. The church in which I was saved did not allow members to dance, play cards, or go to movies. Another church ran an elementary school and said teachers must not serve red drinks because they look like wine. In a conservative college, men were not allowed to wear mustaches. When a male dorm student wanted his brother to sleep over for one night, the school said the brother could stay over but only if he shaved off his mustache.

I attended a mid-week service in a church that had the church covenant on the front wall. It said that members would not drink alcohol in any form. The song leader had a pack of Marlboros sticking out of his shirt pocket. Many lit up cigarettes on the front porch after the service. The church was in tobacco country. I wondered if some church in the Sonoma Valley ruled out cigarettes but sipped wine after services on the portico.

A friend of mine grew up in a rules-saturated church. His grandmother used to warn him about worldliness. She would wag her finger at him and say, "Don't handle, don't taste, don't touch." She quoted Colossians. But grandma's agenda put her church culture ahead of reading verses in context. Colossians 2:22-23 adds: "All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and

doctrines. Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.”

Isaiah did not try to reform Judah by making rules. He humbly made God’s word known.

Growing more holy does not mean creating rules. But it also does not mean doing whatever you please.

Going for holiness means so much more than going to church, even in the right frame of mind and heart. It means being the sanctified church God expects and deserves. It means honoring him all the time. It means what Paul said in Romans 12:1 after surveying sin and salvation: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

Zoom in on Sunday church services for a moment. If you thoroughly pondered Isaiah 6, would your behavior change on Sunday morning? If so, how?

I knew a pastor of a large evangelical church who came at the last minute every Sunday. The sound crew hung his microphone on his office door. He grabbed it and rushed to the sanctuary. The church leadership chuckled at his habit. His lack of discipline overruled his responsibility as a worshiper and as a worship leader on behalf of the God who rules.

No one is casual in Isaiah 6. The prophet does not report, “And I saw that half the seraphs found better things to do. The other half were late to the temple.”

It is so easy to rush into church for the goods and services and miss God. It is easy to miss a bunch of Sundays due to a crazy life. It is also easy to rationalize the behavior.

I know Sunday mornings can be tough. When Francine and I were parents to a two-year-old and a three-year-old, our dog got sick all over the rug on a Sunday morning. I have had the flu and missed services. I have missed due to surgery.

I know that all kinds of things can happen. I ran over a squirrel on the way to church once. That is disturbing even if you are not a member of PETA.

I take it as a given that anyone can be legitimately late or miss a service on a given Sunday. I also take it as a given that failing to see God as “Holy, holy, holy” makes us casual about church services.

Being holy does not mean being legalistic. It also does not mean you have a license to sin. David F. Wells makes the point: “Legalism and antinomianism, in their different ways, damage Christian life because they undo the connections between love and holiness. At their base, in both cases, is a misunderstanding of the character of God.”

God deserves our love all the time. And when we mess up, he deserves our repentance. The holy God is not to be taken lightly.

CONCLUSION

In the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis we glimpse the majesty of Jesus in the figure of Aslan the Lion. Mrs. Beaver tries to prepare Lucy for meeting the greatest king. She says, “If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” ‘Then he isn’t safe?’ said Lucy. ‘Safe?’ said Mr. Beaver; ‘don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.’”

Thank God for his saving grace. Most of all, thank God for being God.

We should be most deeply impressed that God saves sinners and puts them into service. He made a New Jersey-born potty mouth into a gospel preacher. He makes Jews and Gentiles one body of worshipers by grace.

Isaiah 6 says the triune God deserves our humble and hearty worship. He kindly calls us to his holy service. What do you say?

SESSION 3

GO AND TELL Isaiah 6:9-13

Imagine the smoke in the temple and the shaking thresholds. Imagine the seraphs with six wings. I imagine you did that Monday when we studied what Isaiah saw when he received his call.

Did you imagine Isaiah himself? What is your mental image of the prophet Isaiah on the day of his call? Did he have a great white mane? Maybe he looked like King Théoden from Lord of the Rings in pre-thaw state. Maybe to you he looked like Charlton Heston in Hollywood's Ten Commandments after he saw the burning bush and got the tablets.

Did you picture him looking like a college student? That would be closer to the truth. God gave the big call to a twenty-something young man. Too young to be president of the United States, Isaiah became a prophet to the nations.

What kind of life did that mean for him? We don't have to imagine. His book shows and tells us. Turn to Isaiah 6. Today we will cover vs9-13 in this sermon entitled "*Go and Tell.*"

Let's read the section we studied Monday. Look at Isaiah 6:1-8. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. '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.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.' 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!'"

I. MAKE THEM DULL

Supposedly, Queen Victoria invited a renowned pastor to preach. The Queen's staff told him that she preferred short sermons. After he preached, she told him, "You were brief." He said, "I don't like to be tedious." She said, "But you were also tedious."

God did not tell Isaiah to write some sermons and make them dull. Isaiah's pronouncements were not dull. But God directed Isaiah to preach in order to make the people dull.

See Isaiah 6:9-10. "He said, 'Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'" Make the heart of this people

calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Let the head scratching begin! Why would God send a man on a mission like that? Was God playing a sad game?

No. He was being gracious. Consider some facts.

- The negative reaction was not forced. Isaiah’s preaching just added to the heart calluses the people had been building for years and years.
- God was being gracious by sending them Isaiah and other prophets. God was not obligated to send any prophets with warnings. He already told the nation of Israel all that would happen if they became stubborn. He told them details about 600 years earlier in Deuteronomy 28.
- Not everyone became dull through Isaiah’s ministry. The Lord’s patience did produce a faithful remnant.
- Isaiah’s ministry was not just to the people of his time. How many people have been nourished by Isaiah’s ministry over the last 27 centuries? Count me in.

God wants his full truth told even when the people in any place reject it. God has purposes larger than we see. Feel free to scratch your head about God’s ways, but bow your head before his superior wisdom as you scratch.

II. FOR HOW LONG?

Look at the first part of Isaiah 6:11: “Then I said, ‘For how long, Lord?’” The form of the question can mean, “How long am I going to have to do this ministry?” or “How long are your people going to be like this Lord?” Commentators point out that Isaiah might mean both things with one question. Most likely.

First, take the form: “How long am I going to have to do this ministry?”

I was a relatively green pastor. I looked out of the church window and saw a man in our church parking lot looking at the building. I guessed right. He was a pastor looking to co-use a church building. He was an older man. He commented on my relative youth and then said, “That’s wonderful. You have thirty to forty years ahead of you in ministry!” I felt like socking him in the nose. I had just enough sanctification to resist.

When Isaiah got his call, he had about 40-50 years ministry ahead of him. Let that sink in. I imagine his hair was white by the end of that job, if he had any hair left at all.

Hebrews 11 says some of the great models of faith were “*sawed in two*.” Tradition says Isaiah went from “*I saw*” to they sawed.

People today often don't know the most dangerous part of being a prophet in the ancient near east. We might picture wild-eyed characters yelling on a street corner and being ignored. Not back then. Prophets were a standard part of royal courts. Scribes wrote careful copies of what prophets said and stored them royal archives for review.

Isaiah even rebuked the king of his own nation. Listen to Isaiah 39:5-7 for a taste of that daring ministry to his own king. "Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'"

Does that sound like a career a college aged person looks for? It is the career Isaiah got as a young adult in that shaking temple. That would make me shake.

It seems that God did not tell Isaiah how many years his sobering ministry would take. That was merciful. And yet, I imagine that today Isaiah is not much troubled by the total number. He has had 27 centuries in God's presence to forget about the pain.

Pastoral ministry is hard. My friend's father was a pastor for about 15 years. He could not take it anymore so he became a budling manager in Manhattan. One mafia family pressured him to do something and he refused. They threatened his life but he held firm. Another mafia family liked him so they protected him even though he did them no favors. He preferred the mafia to the pastorate.

I knew a youth pastor who had served the army in Iraq. When the church politics got nasty and he came under fire unjustly, he said he would rather be back in Iraq. He was not kidding.

In both cases the part that makes it so hard is clear. Both of those men could face opposition from enemies. The congregation was supposed to be their brothers and sisters in Christ. Friendly fire is the worst, especially when aimed intentionally.

Isaiah knew that pain. He held the line until his ministry was done.

Think about the other form of the question. "How long are your people going to be like this Lord?"

Isaiah would learn that his people were going to resist for a long time and then go into exile for a long time. Isaiah saw well beyond that too. Isaiah's messages to the nations cover 150 years of history. He told the future of local, national, and world politics. He talked about wars yet to come. It is like an American during the war of 1812 telling his contemporaries details about the Viet Nam War. Or like an American during the Civil War telling his audience details of the War on Terror.

"How long?" asked the trembling prophetic newbie. God did not give Isaiah a calendar. He just gave him the strength to carry on.

III. UNTIL THE STUMP

Look at Isaiah 6:11-13. “Then I said, ‘For how long, Lord?’ And he answered: ‘Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.’”

That is not a stump speech you will hear from any political candidate. Israel and Judah had grown prosperous and proud. They kept up religious festivals but had forsaken the Lord as the very purpose of the nation. They crashed like a felled redwood.

Look at chapter 5. It predicts lots of ruin. In Isaiah 5:3-6, God invites the people to debate him: “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.”

See how the chapter ends. Isaiah 5:30 says: “And if one looks at the land, he will see darkness and distress; even the light will be darkened by the clouds.” Then we hit chapter 6 and hear: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Even devastated Judah was full of God’s glory.

God’s wrath reveals his glory. Do we preach this truth? It is risky. It is also right.

God’s wrath is not ill temper. It is the predictable and measured expression of his opposition to all that is deceitful, poisonous, warped, and degrading. Sin deals death to God’s good creation. His anger is proper opposition to all that opposes him. His wrath is holy, holy, holy.

He is also glorified by using the stump to send the ultimate savior. Lord willing, we will study Isaiah 11 where the stump points to the messiah who would produce ultimate hope.

If we diminish God’s holiness, we diminish his love. P. T. Forsyth wrote about holiness fixing God’s love. He did not mean repairing it; he meant holding it firmly in place so it did not go away. He wrote: “Holiness is that in the love of God which fixes it and assures it forever. If holiness fail not, then love cannot.” If God was not holy, we could not trust his statement that he loves us. Holy love does not lie.

IV. OUR POST-STUMP SPEECH

We stand on the other side of the messiah who grew up like a shoot from the stump of Jesse. We see what Jesus did to bring us salvation and bring glory to God the Father. He died for our sins and rose from the grave. He ascended as Lord over all. He gives pardon and new life as a gift. He will give us resurrection glory.

It is now the job of the whole church to go and tell. Some people will reject the message of God's holy love.

Many in Judah did that. In Isaiah 30:8-11 God tells Isaiah: "Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness. For these are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD'S instruction. They say to the seers, 'See no more visions!' and to the prophets, 'Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"

The Hebrew is literally, "Stop from our face the Holy One." Isaiah was showing them way more God than they wanted to see.

We did a Christmas concert in which many guests were present. I played piccolo trumpet as we did the Hallelujah chorus. Then I spoke about how the context in the Bible was about Jesus smashing the sinful nations (Revelation 19). I told them I did not think people would cry out "Hallelujah" if I went to Walmart and broke the pottery with a tire iron. Some people in the congregation were mad at me for saying such things with visitors present. I said that it might be the only time those people encounter the full-fledged, biblical picture of Jesus. In my meditation I emphasized his mercy and grace, but his holiness made even church people upset.

In direct response to the Judean demand "Stop from our face the Holy One," Isaiah said: "Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says."

The apostles did the same thing. Jesus told them to go into all the earth and preach the gospel. Luke caps off the book of Acts with a quote from Isaiah 6. Acts 28:23-31 talks about Paul and the local Jewish leaders who visited him in Rome: "They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: 'The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: "Go to this people and say, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.' For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!' For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He

proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!”

Never empty the gospel to grow church attendance.

CONCLUSION

I stand before you about 40 years after I wanted to sock the pastor in the nose in the church parking lot. Little did I know that day how hard ministry would get.

To get through it all I had to overcome my greatest single danger in ministry: my desire to be praised by people and deemed successful.

I was on a sabbatical when I transitioned from being the associate pastor of a church to being its senior pastor. I knew some people did not think I was the right choice. I let that weigh on me. I was praying about it. Then it hit me. If I set out to prove them wrong, or to prove others right, I lost already. It was a watershed moment.

So, I forget the static and went deep into the Scriptures. I read all the passages that told me what my job was as a pastoral steward. I had been a pastor for years but I went back to basics. By God’s grace, that ministry turned out well.

In Isaiah 30:15, God tells his people: “This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel says: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.’” I had a big helping of both and it made a huge difference in my ministry.

Don’t misunderstand me. I am not against compliments. But I know they can be dangerous. Carl Trueman in his book Strange New World tells how Jean-Jaques Rousseau was flattered into committing theft. A man named Verrat kept puffing him up until he gave into the man’s scheme. Truman insightfully comments: “It was the fact that he liked to be liked, not that he liked doing evil, that proved his undoing.”

We must not be reckless but we must risk rejection. Being spurned does not prove that you are faithful. You might just be naturally obnoxious. But being faithful might mean being spurned.

I determined early on to always define my job by God’s Word. I trust God to tell me what real love and true success look like. Our pragmatic and number crazed culture does not help.

By the way, if you want your church attendance numbers to go up there is an easy way. Have your members come 3 out of 4 Sundays every month.

Numbers never tell the whole story anyway. Nothing fails like false success. Nothing succeeds like faithfulness.

If we are faithful and see impressive numerical growth, the success is still the same size. Starbucks comes in demi, short, tall, grande, venti, and trenta. Ministry success does not. It is either there or it is not.

Isaiah was a success. God made sure we know Isaiah's name today. We know few of the names of those who dismissed his ministry. Isaiah wanted to go and tell anyway because, in that temple, he saw, heard, and repented.

Jesus was a perfect success. Crowds often left Jesus even though he is the ultimate prophet, priest and king. But God the Father said the Son always did what pleased him.

Go and tell—and leave the results to God.

SESSION 4

A STRANGE DELIGHT Isaiah 11:1-3a

I loved a day at the beach as a boy. I grew up in New Jersey where the water was often cold. I would have blue lips many a time. The waves did not scare me even when they got a bit rough.

Long before my time, another boy was having no fun at the beach. He was not doing the entertaining things I did like building sand forts, body surfing, and throwing jellyfish at my sister. He was screaming. It was no day at the beach for him. It was a time for terror.

His name was Napoleon. He was not *the* Napoleon. He was Eugene Louis Jean Joseph Napoleon. He was the son of the nephew of *the* Napoleon. He was the “prince imperial” and was in line to the throne.

The prince was afraid to enter the ocean. In the tradition of the “sink or swim” school of water safety, some adults tossed him in the waves. The report says: “He struggled out and ran away as fast as he could, howling in terror. He was caught and soothed, and then an attempt was made to rationalize his fears. Why, he was asked, was he afraid of the sea when he had stood by while soldiers fired off their canon and had not been frightened? The child thought this one over for a moment, then said, ‘Because I’m in command of the soldiers, but I’m not in command of the sea.’”

Eugene was a smart kid. How smart are we? If the sea inspires awe, what about the living God who made it and controls it? Psalm 89:9 describes God, saying, “You rule over the surging sea; when it’s waves mount up, you still them”. For God, all the seas together are a puddle on one planet in one solar system in one galaxy in a universe of billions of galaxies that he made by simply speaking his will! How do you feel about that God? Should you fear him?

For centuries, Christian preachers talked much about the fear of God. Not so much now. We will talk about it today and, I trust, benefit from it.

Start with a seven-question quiz. Don’t answer out loud.

1. The first verse of the first Bible book written mentions the “Fear of God.” True False
Job 1:1: “In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.”
2. Different Hebrew and Greek words are used for fearing God than are used for fearing dangerous people and things. True False

3. Who does the Bible describe as fearing God? A. Some non-believers, but mostly believers B. Some believers, but mostly non-believers
4. The Bible says we fear God because He forgives. True False
5. This is an exact quote of Isaiah 8:13 from the NIV: “The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.” True False
6. While others speak of fearing God in the Bible, Jesus never told us to fear God. True False
7. The Bible says Jesus feared God. True False

Our focus in this session will be Isaiah 11:1-3a. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.” We will unpack this passage using four points.

I. A SURPRISING SHOOT

In the book of Isaiah Jesus appears as a special agent of God’s redemption marked by the Holy Spirit resting upon him. He is pictured as both a mighty king and as a humble servant.

Isaiah 11 says he is a special king since he is from Jesse’s line, which is the line of King David. That line had fallen on hard times when Isaiah 11 was written. But in the future, this king would arise like a shoot from a cut-off stump and would rise to unparalleled greatness.

Can we be sure that this is Jesus in chapter 11? Yes, because in Romans 15:8-12, Paul makes it clear that Isaiah spoke of Jesus here. Even though Isaiah preached over 700 years before Jesus was born, God used him to predict the coming and glory of Christ.

Besides Paul’s testimony, we have the foremost authority on Jesus saying this Spirit-led figure in Isaiah is Jesus. Who is that authority? Jesus. He identified himself as such at the beginning of his public ministry as recorded in Luke 4.

Jesus is the only one who is at once fully God and fully human. We must hold unswervingly to both truths. Often, we have to defend the full deity of Christ, and we do since the Bible teaches that he is true God. But in our legitimate desire to defend his deity, I fear that we may downplay the full humanity of Jesus. Hebrews tells us Jesus “shared in our humanity”. He was just as human as we are. He was not a human sinner, but he was a human being.

When he was born in Bethlehem, David's line was in disarray. The baby in the manger was like a little shoot coming out of a great stump. As Isaiah 11 continues we see he becomes the king of the nations and Lord over all.

II. A STRANGE DELIGHT

Look at the list of spiritual qualities the incarnate Son possesses. We find six things: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear. Of the six, which would you consider the outstanding possession? We might say:

- "Wisdom, understanding, knowledge – that's great stuff. To know the answers to life!"
- "Counsel. To know the answers to the problems of the masses. How wonderful to be of help."
- "Might. Give me some of that. Not measly political power but the kind Jesus had. Power to calm storms, heal the sick, and raise the dead."

The text emphasizes fear. It is the only aspect mentioned twice. It is the only one called the Lord's delight.

Why would Jesus, of all people, fear God and find it delightful? The answer is: because he was fully human. Question: what experiences did Jesus need to have in order to live a truly human life? Common answers might include that he had to be born, grow, laugh, cry, get tired, hungry and thirsty. He did all that. But would you say he would also have to fear God? At the close of Ecclesiastes, after looking at every angle of human experience under the sun, Solomon called the fear of God "the duty of all mankind." As a wise human, Jesus feared God.

I sought to make a definition of the fear of God that did not use the standard word "awe" and that captured both the terror of judgment and the comfort of salvation. My definition of the fear of God is: "To be most deeply impressed with God."

The only proper posture for a human being is to be most deeply impressed with God. That was the way it was supposed to be with Adam. But he foolishly chose fruit over fear. And no end of misery resulted. As a Russian proverb says: "Adam ate the apple and our teeth still ache."

Nothing impressed Jesus more than God the Father did. Nothing. Not food. Not money. Not Caesar. Not crowds. Not power. Not religion. Not criticism. Not suffering. Not even death.

Jesus honored the Father by making the Father's will the sum and substance of his human existence. Sin is a degradation of humanity. Jesus made the grade. Jesus was the only human to do so. He had to be a morally perfect human in order to be our savior.

As savior, he becomes our model. We look to him to see what a human being should be. Many people have worn the famous bracelet with just four little letters: WWJD.

They mean: “What Would Jesus Do?” Maybe we should wear bracelets that say FGJD.” That would mean “Fear God, Jesus Did.”

You have probably seen the commercials that cast Jesus in a progressive mode and use the tagline: “He gets us.” Holiness and fear do not appear in them. Maybe we need some that point to Jesus and say: “He gets the Father. He fears God.”

He found delight in fearing God. What do you find delightful? My childhood neighborhood was renowned for its classic Italian bread. It is velvety soft inside with a crust so crisp you can cut the roof of your mouth if you bite carelessly. Sometimes late at night we would get stuck at the red light next to one of the best bakeries. It is the only red light I ever hoped to catch. The aroma of that hot bread wafting from those brick ovens was, in a word, delightful. This is the image Isaiah paints of Jesus and his fear. The Hebrew literally says: “The fear of the LORD is fragrance to him.”

The incarnate Son was a God-fearing man. The phrase may seem quaint and be heard now only in Westerns. Proverbs 23:17 says: “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.” Jesus put that into sandal leather in the dusty streets of Palestine.

The evangelical church in America rarely even mentions the fear of God. American evangelicals have not delighted in the fear of God, we have deleted it. We must restore godly fear to the prime place it has in scripture and in the life of God’s people.

The fear of God only seems like a strange delight to us. It makes perfect sense. Jesus knows that because he sees the Father as he is.

III. THE SPIRIT IS THE SOURCE

The source of the Lord’s fear is spelled out for us. For the Son of God, the fount of fear was the Spirit of God. Follow the flow as I remove some of the clauses to show the grammatical link: “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of...the fear of the LORD.” Did you think of the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of the fear of the Lord”?

Here we come back to the full humanity of Jesus. Why was Jesus’ life so marked by power and purity? Some say: “Simple. He was God.” He was and is. But it is not that simple.

In our legitimate desire to highlight the deity of Christ, we may too hastily attribute his powerful works to his deity, while they were actually the fruit of his full reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit. He began his ministry by emphasizing that the Spirit was upon him. He carried it out by living that out. No doubt Jesus could do all that the New Testament records and more by unleashing the power of his deity. But the Bible points to his faithful reliance on the Spirit as the source. As a human, he yielded his life to the Holy Spirit.

It is a wonderful thing that the Son of God can inspire reverential fear in us. It is amazing that he was willing to exemplify it to us here on earth.

IV. THE SAME APPLIES TO THE CHURCH

I exhort you to do three things.

First be very impressed with your sin and turn to the savior. Be most deeply impressed with his holiness and his saving power.

Psalm 130 says that divine condemnation for sin is a reasonable cause for fear, but so is divine forgiveness. Here are vs3-4: "If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you." The text literally says "so that you may be feared."

We should be even more in awe of God's forgiving grace than the psalmist because we can gaze upon the glorious cross. We can sense the magnitude of the power that made eternal death retreat! We can marvel at the immensity of love! We are swallowed up in the boundless gift of eternal life! We can, in two words, fear God.

The times in my Christian life that I was most insecure before God were the times I allowed my sin to be more impressive to me than God was to me. My sin wowed me more than the very cross that secured my salvation. I stood in awe of my failure rather than God's forgiveness. I began to see it as so big that God was stymied by it. But then I saw how badly I was seeing. I saw how it was silly to think God was so small as to not be able to deal with my weakness. It was prideful to think he could love and bear with others but not me. So, I had to start fearing God with a will. I had to let the true magnitude of my cross-purchased redemption grow in my perception until it chased away the haunting specter of condemnation.

Second, obey God out of positive fear. This careful form of fear comes from reverential love for God. The nineteenth century preacher Charles Bridges puts it well: "Two short sentences sum up the whole—*Fear God, and keep his commandments*. The sentences are in the right order. *The fear of God* is the hidden principle of obedience...It is not a legal principle of terror or bondage, but the genuine spirit of confidence—the delicate expression of filial love in the heart of the child of God—the holy fruit of forgiveness. Here we walk with our Father, humbly, acceptably, securely – looking not at an offended God with terror—but at a reconciled God with reverential love. All the gracious influences on the soul – cherished under the power of the Spirit—all flow out in godly *fear* towards him".

Why did Jesus fear God? Because he is the Son. To use Bridges' term, Jesus had "filial fear". That means a son's fear. The only difference between Jesus and other humans who fear God with filial fear, is that Jesus never had to be forgiven. He was without sin.

In Proverbs 8:13, wisdom personified cries out: "To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech." Jesus wisely hated sin. He loved the Father and his will so much he would go to the cross rather than chose another path.

In Scripture, one result stands out when a person fears God. Over one fourth of the references to the fear of God mention this result. Know what it is? The person who fears God...obeys God.

Here is an example from the same book of Isaiah. Isaiah 50:10 says: "Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God."

Philippians 2:12-13 also makes the point: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

Keep in mind that this is addressed to a congregation and it is about pursuing godliness. We often individualize and psychologize this passage. We hear it as if it meant: "You...individual believer there...by your own good works contribute something to your acceptance by a holy God, but do it with deep insecurity because you never know if it will be quite good enough." Wrong. This passage was not designed to produce neurotic people.

Paul issued this challenge to a congregation, not an individual. The pronouns are plural. He encouraged the body. Paul calls the Philippians "my dear friends." He is settling them with encouraging words, not unsettling them with spiritual threats.

Consider a tube of toothpaste. We can only work out the toothpaste because the manufacturer made it and worked it into the tube. Paul charges the congregation to work out the salvation life God has put into their church body. He encourages them to use the gift of grace.

Paul started this passage saying: "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose."

If the Philippians were most deeply impressed with God and the magnitude of the salvation he gave them by grace alone, then they would very carefully and obediently work out all that salvation held for them in their life as a congregation. If they did that, they would forsake power politics in church life. So will we if we fear God.

Be fully open to obedience. Don't be impressed with the spirit of the age. Don't be impressed with your own desires or wisdom. Don't stand in awe of the world or of yourself. Fear God.

As individuals and as a church, we are not free to make decisions or act on our feelings, preferences, or under cultural pressure. We must fear God and obey the word of God. When I made difficult decisions as a leader, people would sometimes ask where I got the courage. It is really not about courage. I just fear the Lord more than the congregation.

Third find your power where the incarnate Lord did. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with godly fear. How often have you hear the church ask for that gift in prayer meetings?

The fear of God is not generated by emotional manipulation, shouting preachers or any mere technique of mood or music. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit has obviously been somewhat controversial among evangelicals. But we can all agree that we should seek the fear of God as an abiding manifestation of the Spirit. If the Lord himself singled it out as precious, so should we.

When our Lord walked this earth as one of us, he did not delight in the things that enthralled so many in his day and in ours. This is the one time the Bible tells us he delighted in something. As those who owe our very breath to his creative power, as those who owe our forgiveness to his very life blood, as those who owe our coming resurrection to his power over death and as those who count on an eternity of joy thanks to his grace, how can we be wise without humbly and gratefully walking the path he has blazed for us?

Let's go forth like Jesus, with Jesus, in the Spirit, and delight in the fear of the Lord.

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BACKGROUND FOR UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

“The Book of Isaiah, one of the most important and best-loved books in the Bible, is sometimes called the Gospel of Isaiah because of the good news that characterizes its message. Indeed, no other Old Testament book contains as many references to the Messiah as does the Book of Isaiah. Its sixty-six chapters contain crucial passages that allude to Christ’s incarnation, earthly ministry, and atoning death, as well as to His second coming and glorious world-wide rule. So important is Isaiah’s prophecy that the New Testament alludes to it frequently and quotes directly from it no fewer than sixty-two times. Only the Book of Psalms is cited more often in the New Testament. Furthermore in Christ’s preaching certain key verses from Isaiah played a prominent role. Isaiah has also been called the Romans of the Old Testament because, like the Book of Romans, it sets forth God’s case against sinners, unveils the wretchedness of the human heart, and reveals the way of salvation for Israel and the world. Under the hammer blows of Isaiah’s message, God calls sinners to repentance and graciously promises forgiveness. It is no accident that in Romans Paul quoted Isaiah seventeen times – more than any other New Testament author.” Herbert Wolf

“The era in which Isaiah lived witnessed the rise and fall of kingdoms, as major military powers vied for control of Palestine. During his ministry, which spanned most of the second half of the eighth century B.C., Assyria emerged as the dominant world power. In 722 B.C. the mighty Assyrians captured the capital city of Samaria and brought about the full collapse of the northern kingdom of Israel. Thousands of Isaiah’s countrymen were taken into exile, never to return to their beloved homeland. The southern kingdom of Judah also staggered before the Assyrian juggernaut, and in 701 B.C. Judah nearly suffered the same fate as Israel. Judah had sided first with Assyria and then with Egypt during the stormy years between 734 and 701 B.C. By the close of the century, Hezekiah joined the coalition against Assyria, and the armies of Sennacherib advanced to punish the Judean king. But God miraculously intervened and crushed the invader’s forces, granting Judah and Jerusalem a century-long reprieve. Yet before disaster struck his army, Sennacherib had devastated most of the cities of Judah and deported thousands of its citizens. In those traumatic times, Isaiah alternated between condemning and encouraging, as the moral and spiritual condition of the rulers and the people of Israel dictated.” Herbert Wolf

“Isaiah interacted prophetically with the three major empires between 750 and 539 B.C., outlining their impact on Israel and Judah and showing how they fit into the sovereign purposes of God.” Herbert Wolf

“Scholars have long marveled at the literary beauty and at the depth and power of Isaiah’s poetry. Most of the Book of Isaiah was written in parallelism, the primary form of Hebrew poetry. Isaiah employed a wide variety of poetic devices in individual verses, building the verses into hymns of praise (12:1-6; 38:10-20) and national lament (63:7 – 64:12), into oracles (13:1 – 23:18), a taunt-song (14:4-21), satire (44:9-20), and even wisdom poems (28:23-29). The Song of the Vineyard in 5:1-7 (27:2-6) is a terse, evocative, poetic masterpiece with a devastating application.” Herbert Wolf

“The Hebrew name of this prophet is YesHa-Yahu, meaning ‘Yahweh is salvation.’ Appropriately enough, the basic theme of Isaiah’s message is that salvation is bestowed only by grace, by the power of God, the Redeemer, rather than by the strength of man or the good works of the flesh. The holy God will not permit unholiness in His covenant people, and will therefore deal with them in such a way as to chasten and purge them and make them fit to participate in His program of redemption. Isaiah sets forth the doctrine of Christ in such full detail that he has rightly been described as ‘the evangelical prophet.’ Deeper Christological insights are to be found in his work than anywhere else in the Old Testament.” Gleason Archer

“The prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz (amos – ‘strong or courageous’), was apparently a member of a fairly distinguished and influential family. Not only is his father’s name given, but he appears to have been on familiar terms with the royal court even in the reign of Ahaz. He must have been a well-educated student of international affairs, who spent most of his time in the city of Jerusalem, where he was in touch with the crosscurrents of national and foreign affairs. Directed by God to oppose with vigor any entangling alliances with foreign powers (whether with Assyria as against Samaria and Damascus, or with Egypt as against Assyria), his cause was foredoomed to failure, for both government and people chose to put their trust in political alliances rather than in the promises of God. Until the death of Hezekiah (in 697 or 698), Isaiah enjoyed a large measure of respect despite the unpopularity of his political views, and in the period of religious reform carried through by Hezekiah, his influence upon religion was most significant. Yet as God warned him in the temple vision (Isa. 6:9-10), the nation by and large turned a deaf ear even to his spiritual message. Apart from a small minority of earnest believers, his ministry to his contemporaries was little short of a failure. In the reign of Manasseh, the degenerate son of Hezekiah, a strong tide of reaction set in against the strict Jehovah-worship of the previous reign. Isaiah lived to see the undoing of all his own work so far as contemporary politics were concerned. In spiritual matters, his countrymen fell into an even more desperate condition of depravity than they had in the reign of Ahaz. Recognizing the inevitability of God’s judgment upon the unrepentant nation, Isaiah’s interest during the reign of Manasseh came to be focused increasingly upon the coming overthrow of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Captivity, and the restoration which lay beyond. An old tradition relates that he was martyred at some time in the reign of Manasseh, possibly by being sawed in two inside a hollow log (Heb. 11:37). Since he records the death of Sennacherib in Isa. 37:37-38, it is fair to assume that Isaiah lived until after Sennacherib’s death in 681 B.C.” Gleason Archer

“Judah had sunk to such a low ebb in matters of religion and morals that the very honor of God demanded a total destruction of the kingdom and a removal of the entire nation into exile (just as had been foretold or forewarned in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28). If God was going to vindicate His holy law, and honor His own promises of disciplinary chastisement, there was no alternative but devastation and captivity. But once a people had been carried off into exile in a distant land, there was virtually no hope that they would ever return to their ancestral soil. Such a thing had never happened before in history, and humanly speaking, there was no prospect that the dispersed Judah of a future generation would ever return to the land of promise. It was therefore altogether appropriate for God to furnish a very definite token or sign to which exiled believers

might look as an indication of their coming deliverance and restoration to Palestine. This sign was furnished in the specifying of the very name [Cyrus] of their future deliverer." Gleason Archer

"Chapters 1-35 and 40-66 are predominately verse, reflecting the powerful rhythmic style characteristic of prophetic preaching. But at the center, in chapters 36-39, stands an extended block of material which is predominately prose. It has two parts. The first (chapters 36-37) describes Sennacherib's invasion and its outcome, and finally resolves the Assyrian crisis which has dominated the whole first half of the book. The second (chapters 38-39) deals with Hezekiah's illness and his reception of envoys from Merodach-Baladan. It anticipates the Babylonian crisis, which casts its shadow over the entire second half of the book. So chapters 36-39 are effectively the structural pivot on which the whole book turns. It is preceded by three units (chapters 1-12; 13-27 and 28-35), all of which end with the redeemed singing God's praises in Zion, or on their way to it. It is followed by another three units (40:1 – 51:11; 51:12 – 55:13 and chapters 56-66) which end in the same way." Barry Webb

"Of key significance here are the two passages in chapters 6 and 40 in which Isaiah finds himself summoned into the presence of God to receive a specific commission. Both the nature of these passages (commissioning) and their strategic location (at or near the beginning of Parts 1 and 5) confirm their great importance for an understanding of the book's major themes. The first commits Isaiah to a ministry of judgment, the second to a ministry of comfort; and these become the dominant notes of the first and second halves of the book respectively. It is a book about demolition and reconstruction, judgment and salvation. And the order is significant: paradoxically, salvation emerges out of judgment and is possible only because of it." Barry Webb

"Deliverance and restoration are developed in three aspects: Israel's return from captivity under Cyrus, deliverance from sin, and the ultimate establishment of righteousness when Israel and foreigners will enjoy God's blessings forever. The scope of fulfillment covers a long period of time. Initial fulfillment comes in part with the return from captivity under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah; atonement for sin was historically unfolded in New Testament times; the establishment of the universal kingdom is still pending." Samuel Shultz

BOOKS TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND AND APPLY ISAIAH

COMMENTARIES ON THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

Isaiah: A Covenant to Be Kept For The Sake Of the Church, by Allan Harman (Christian Focus Publications, 2005). This commentary is solid and fairly easy to use.

Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah, by Herbert M. Wolf (Zondervan Publishing, 1985). This book is also user-friendly. It contains a lot of good background and summary material. Dr. Wolf was my Hebrew professor, a godly servant, and is now with the Lord.

The Message of Isaiah, by Barry G. Webb (Inter-Varsity Press, 1996). This is a great all-round commentary for a broad audience.

The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary, by J. Alec Motyer (Inter-Varsity Press, 1993). Motyer produced a big work with a lot of scholarly material, but his pastor's heart shines through. This commentary is quite an achievement.

The Book of Isaiah, by John N. Oswalt (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986 & 1998). This two-volume work is the most complete and the most technical commentary on this list.

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, by Gleason L. Archer (Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, 1994). Archer does a fine job of defending against liberal (anti-supernatural) attacks on the historic position that Isaiah actually wrote the whole book that bears his name.

On the Reliability of the Old Testament, by K. A. Kitchen (Eerdmans, 2003). This scholarly book is especially helpful on how prophets wrote and how their writings were archived for later retrieval, an issue relevant to the integrity of Isaiah.

Jerusalem: The Tragedy and the Triumph, by Charles Gulston (Zondervan Publishing, 1978). Gulston brings the whole history of the key city to life.

APPLYING KEY TRUTHS FROM THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

The Knowledge of the Holy, by A. W. Tozer (Harper, 1961). A classic to feed the mind and heart.

The Pursuit of Holiness, by Jerry Bridges (NavPress, 1978). This straightforward book connects doctrine and the practical pursuit of holy living.

Holiness: its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties and Roots, by J.C. Ryle (Attic Press, Inc., 1977). Ryle was a British clergyman who lived from 1816-1910. His ministry has often nourished me.

The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness, by Kevin DeYoung, (Crossway, 2012). The author applies gospel truth to church life.

God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy Love of God Reorients Our World, by David F. Wells (Crossway, 2014). A somewhat challenging but very helpful guide for course corrections about the idea and practice of godly love.

Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship, by David Peterson (Eerdmans, 1992). A careful exploration of worship as the Bible defines it.

We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Worship, by G. K. Beale (IVP, 2008). Beale shows how idolatry boomerangs on the sinner and how God restores his image-bearers through salvation.

Servanthood as Worship: The Privilege of Life in a Local Church, by Nate Palmer (Cruciform Press, 2010). This easy-to-read book helps us apply the servanthood theme that is so prominent in Isaiah.

The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions, edited by Arthur Bennett (Banner of Truth, 1997). A beautiful, poetic book of prayers that reflect God's holiness.

The Supremacy of God in Preaching, by John Piper (Baker Books, 1990). Piper puts the focus on the proclamation of God's glory.

How Do Preaching and Corporate Prayer Work Together, by Ryan M. McGraw (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014). This booklet (a mere 26 pages) is packed with wisdom needed in churches today. I am so glad I found this one.

The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity, by Donald McCullough (NavPress, 1995). A moving challenge to get real about God in all his glory.

Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God, by Mark Galli (Baker Books, 2006). Galli provides a needed antidote to presentations of Jesus as a soft and sentimental figure.

Glory Hunger: God, the Gospel, and Our Quest for Something More, by J. R. Vassar (Crossway, 2015). A very practical exploration of how only God's glory can fill our longing for meaning.

In the Face of God: The Dangers and Delights of Spiritual Intimacy, by Michael Horton (Word, 1996). Horton examines various concepts of sanctification and tests them in light of scripture.

God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology, by James M. Hamilton Jr. (Crossway, 2010). Hamilton's book is a thorough survey of the Bible showing that salvation and judgment go together.

Idols of the Heart: Learning to Long for God Alone, by Elyse Fitzpatrick (P&R Publishing, 2001). This is an excellent, approachable study on how to avoid idolatry today.

Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters, by Timothy Keller (Riverhead Books, 2009). Keller does a great job of showing the true dimensions and contemporary dangers of idolatry.

The Other Worldview: Exposing Christianity's Greatest Threat, by Peter Jones (Kirkdale, 2013). This important book shows how neo-pagan ideas are gaining traction in our culture.

What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission, by Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert (Crossway, 2011). One of the best explorations of what the mission of the church is, especially in relation to true justice.

Prepare: Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture, by J. Paul Nyquist (Moody, 2015). A great reminder of our mission. Isaiah was not the last one to pay a price for serving God as this sobering yet encouraging book proves.

Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions, by John Piper (Baker, 1993). Piper shows how God himself is the point of evangelism.

FACETS OF GOD'S GLORY FROM ISAIAH

"It's tempting to read such sections of Scripture [Isaiah chapters 2, 13, 16, 23, and 40] and think of God as a petty, pouting glory hog who can't stand the thought of someone else getting the attention he wants. But it's not an issue of God's insecurity. It's an issue of God's supremacy. It is the economics of glory. When man's glory is raised against God's, the bottom line of the riches of God's glory reveals the utter bankruptcy of man's." J. R. Vassar

THE ETERNAL GOD IS THE ONLY TRUE GOD

"This is what the LORD says – Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD almighty: I am the first and I am the last. Apart from me there is no God. ...All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame." 44:6, 9

GOD IS HOLY TO THE MAX

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke." 6:1-4

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF AND NOTES OUR RESPONSE

"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." 66:2

GOD SHOULD BE FEARED

"The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said: 'Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.'" 8:11-14

GOD CREATED ALL THINGS

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom." 40:28

GOD WRITES FLAWLESS HISTORY, EVEN IN ADVANCE

"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." 46:10

GOD WILL BE ACKNOWLEDGED BY ALL IN THE END

"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are righteousness and strength.'" 45:22-24

GOD GATHERS A HOLY PEOPLE FROM ALL NATIONS

"And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD-- on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,' says the LORD. 'They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,' says the LORD. 'As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,' declares the LORD, 'so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,' says the LORD. 'And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.'" 66:20-21

GOD DISPLAYS JUSTICE IN JUDGEMENT AND IN SALVATION

"But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness. Then sheep will graze as in their own pasture; lambs will feed among the ruins of the rich. Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes, to those who say, 'Let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it. Let it approach, let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come, so we may know it.' Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight." 5:16-21

"Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you." 30:18-19

GOD GIVES A GRACIOUS INVITATION TO THE HUMBLE

“This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.’” 30:15

“For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’” 57:15

GOD EXPECTS A LOT FROM HIS SERVANTS

“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!’ He said, ‘Go and tell this people: “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.” Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’” 6:8-10

“And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.” 56:6-7a

GOD HAS ONE SUPREME SERVANT

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.” 11:1-3

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ... After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” 53:4-6, 11-12

THE HOLY ONE

The book of Isaiah calls God “the Holy One” 29 times. God’s holiness is a theme we cannot afford to forget or minimize. Read the following verses in context to fortify your appreciation of our holy God.

1:4

5:19,24

10:17,20

12:6

17:7

29:19,23

30:11,12,15

31:1

37:23

40:25

41:14,16,20

43:3,14,15

45:11

47:4

48:17

49:7

54:5

55:5

60:9,14

QUOTES FOR UNDERSTANDING ISAIAH 6

“From one point of view, worship in the Old Testament is an attitude of homage or adoration to God as a great king. It could be expressed in silence or by a simple gesture. It could be indicated by that gesture in association with praise or the offering of sacrifices. In the final analysis, it is the attitude of the heart that really matters. Such responses were made spontaneously, in recognition of some new disclosure of God’s character and will, or in the course of some regular pattern of ritual activity. Adoration was not a form of intimacy with God or an indication of special affection towards him, but rather an expression of awe or grateful submission – a recognition of his gracious character and rule.” David Peterson

“We must not think of God as highest in an ascending order of beings, starting with the single cell and going on up from the fish to the bird to the animal to man to angel to cherub to God. This would be to grant God eminence, even pre-eminence, but that is not enough; we must grant Him *transcendence* in the fullest meaning of that word. Forever God stands apart, in light unapproachable. He is as high above an archangel as above a caterpillar, for the gulf that separates the archangel from the caterpillar is but finite, while the gulf between God and the archangel is infinite. The caterpillar and the archangel, though far removed from each other in the scale of created things, are nevertheless one in that they are alike created. They both belong in the category of that-which-is-not-God and are separated by infinitude itself.” A. W. Tozer

“The Hebrew word for holiness probably comes from a Semitic root that means ‘to cut off’ or ‘separate’. Thus it denotes first the fact that God is the transcendent God who stands apart from all others and from the whole of creation (Isa. 40:25). Secondly, it speaks of the ethical purity of God, and in this sense he is the only one who can be called ‘holy’, but it also comes to be used of the standard of purity that God requires of his creatures.” Allan Harman

“It would seem from John 12:39-41 that it was a vision of Christ that Isaiah saw. John quotes words from Isaiah as he summarizes the ministry of Jesus, and immediately following the quotation from Isaiah 6:10 he says: ‘Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him’ (NIV).” Allan Harman

“Few could hold their own against Isaiah, but up against God, Isaiah is leveled. Compared to God, Isaiah’s glory and righteousness are revealed as infinitely inadequate. By the grace of God, he is cleansed from his sin and commissioned to God’s service. This experience made him the ideal spokesman to God’s people and those of the surrounding nations who had exalted themselves above God.” J. R. Vassar

“We need glory-hungry men and women who seek glory for the triune God. We need a groundswell of saints, smitten with the beauty and power of God, who refuse to compete with him for praise. We don’t lack for glory-hungry men and women who snap selfies and yell, ‘Look at me!’ This world is heavy on those who can’t see that there is something heavier to love and live for. We need the heart of the psalmist who prays,

'Not to us, O Lord!' We need the glory hunger of Jesus that cries, 'Father, glorify your name!' We need men and women dialed into the preeminence of Jesus and can clearly see the end of all glories raised up against his. We need men and women who have stopped selling tickets to their own show and are praying for Jesus to take center stage and set the world right." J.R. Vassar

"Shaking is the customary reaction of earth to the divine presence (Ex. 19:18; Hab. 3:3-10). Concentrated on *doorposts and thresholds* it specifically prohibits Isaiah's entry to the divine presence, just as *smoke* forbids him to see God. The divine nature as such is an active force of total exclusion. Why is this? Isaiah tells us how the facts of verse 4 are to be interpreted. He knows his loss, describes it and explains it. *Nidmeti* (ruined) is from *Vdama* ('to be silent'), which is used of the silence following disaster or death. 'Silenced' would be telling in this context, *i.e.* excluded from the heavenly choir, forbidden even to join from afar in adoration, but the silence of death must be included too. The explanation of this judgment is that what we might reckon the lightest of sins (*unclean lips*) is linked with what we might accept as the least threatening of privileges (*seen...the Lord*) but the mixture deadly." J. A. Motyer

"The altar was the place where the holy God accepted and was satisfied by blood sacrifice (Lev. 17:11). It holds together the ideas of the atonement, propitiation and satisfaction required by God and of the forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation needed by his people. All this is achieved through substitutionary sacrifice and brought to Isaiah, encapsulated in the single symbol of the *live coal*." J. A. Motyer

"In the implied contrast between King Uzziah (1) and '*the King, the Lord Almighty*' (5), we are taken at once to the central theme of the chapter (divine kingship) and the root problem underlying Israel's failure (trust in mere humans rather than trust in the Lord, 2:22). As is so often the case, increased wealth had brought a diminished view of God, so that people felt secure in their sin as long as they performed the appropriate rituals (1:12-17). But here Isaiah sees the Lord as he is, *high and exalted*, beyond manipulation, *seated* on his judgment *throne*. The time of reckoning has come. Heaven and earth merge in this blinding vision of the one who is above all *holy*, a term which, in view of 5:16, includes both transcendence and righteousness. The *seraphs*, by their words and actions, show that the appropriate response is reverence, service and praise." J. A. Motyer

"'Unclean' is a general term in the Old Testament for all that is, for whatever reason, unfit to be in God's presence. Here the uncleanness is clearly moral, for it is associated with the *lips* and therefore, by implication, with the heart. Isaiah cannot praise and serve God as the seraphs do because, in the depths of his being, he is unclean, just as his compatriots are. It is remarkable to see the prophet identify himself so completely with those whose sins he has been denouncing in the previous chapters. But in the presence of God degrees of sin become irrelevant. It is the holiness of God which reveals to us our true condition, not comparison with others. Paradoxically, Isaiah's confession of being unclean like his fellows has set him apart from them, for he, unlike them, has been willing to acknowledge his condition." J. A. Motyer

“I’d long suspected the worship experience at our church was aimed more at the congregation’s sense of excitement and engagement than at God’s worthiness and exaltation. Certainly there is nothing wrong with feeling good when celebrating God’s character and work. But if the purpose of worship is to feel good, we stop worshiping God.” Jared Wilson

“In Isaiah 6, the Lord calls the prophet Isaiah to go preach his word. It’s a very practical matter. But Isaiah’s ministry, foreordained by God, would upset the applecart of the modern-day pragmatist. God tells Isaiah that people won’t listen. That they will hate him. And in fact, the Lord promises that Isaiah will lose 90 percent of the people through his ministry. Now tell me, is that the kind of ministry vision you would sign up for? If you were interviewing for a pastoral position in a church and promised them that you would shrink the church to 10 percent of its current numbers, do you think you would get the job? In the pragmatic way of thinking, faithful church ministry always results in growth. And it does! But not always in the ways we expect and desire. Isaiah’s mission cost his ministry 90 percent of the people. But the people who stayed got stronger in their faith, more healthy. And it was out of that ‘stump’ (Isa. 6:13; 11:1) that the way of Christ emerged. Pragmatism has utilitarian ethos to it. It is by nature unspiritual. It has no room for discernment in it. So if Jesus lost the five thousand people who came to the all-you-can-eat buffet (John 6) because he started preaching himself as the true bread of life, the pragmatist would take him aside and explain that he was being reassigned from speaking to hospitality.” Jared Wilson

“Isaiah’s preaching will not make it easier for the people to believe and repent. It will make it more difficult. The faculties of perception and response (eyes, ears, and heart) will be dulled and apathetic. But why should God desire to harden people’s hearts? Why should he wish them not to be healed? The text itself gives no reason, but we may offer some general deductions. It is evident that something is more important than healing. What could that be? Surely it is a pure revelation of the character of God and of the human condition. As it happened, such a revelation could only harden Isaiah’s generation in its rebellion (3:8-9; 5:18-19). For Isaiah to declare faithfully what he knew to be so would not result in an admission of guilt and a turning to God. Rather, it would bring about a more adamant refusal to recognize need. What was the alternative? Perhaps if the prophet would alter the truth in certain ways the people might be more responsive and, after a fashion, be healed. Yet such a healing would be a mockery. For what can heal except God’s truth? It is as though Isaiah should tell them that they did not need to see God as he did nor be cleansed as he was to be a servant of God as he was. The ultimate result would be deadly. It would confirm that generation in its syncretism and pervert the truth for all generations to come. It would sell the future for the apparent sake of the present. But if the truth could not save the present generation, if it would, in fact, destroy that generation, it could, faithfully recorded, save future generations. This, then, was Isaiah’s commission, as it is of all servants of God, not to be successful in a merely human sense but to be faithful.” John Oswalt

“In the New Testament this passage [Isa 6:9-10] is quoted four times to explain why Jesus used parables to teach the people. In effect, Jesus said he used parables so that

people *will not* understand and turn and be healed. It is a powerful weeding out process.” Andrew Davis

“I can’t give you a surefire formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: try to please everybody all the time.” Herbert Bayard Swope

“Lacking reverence for the Word of God, many congregations are caught in a frantic quest for significance in worship. Christians leave worship services asking each other, ‘Did you get anything out of that?’ Churches produce surveys to measure expectations for worship. Would you like more music? What kind? How about drama? Is our preacher sufficiently creative? Expository preaching demands a very different set of questions. Will I obey the Word of God? How must my thinking be realigned by Scripture? How must I change my behavior to be fully obedient to the Word? These questions reveal submission to the authority of God and reverence for the Bible as His Word. Likewise, the preacher must demonstrate his own reverence for God’s Word by dealing truthfully and responsibly with the text. He must not be flippant or casual, much less dismissive or disrespectful. Of this we can be certain – no congregation will revere the Bible more than the preacher does.” Albert Mohler

“Expository preaching must once again be central to the life of the church and central to Christian worship. In the end, the church will not be judged by its Lord for the quality of its music but for the faithfulness of its preaching. The preacher will be judged for his preaching, and the congregation will be judged for its hearing—and for the preaching it has demanded.” Albert Mohler

“The ideal minister is first the servant of the word, then of man. It is the Gospel revelation that sets up the ideal; it is not the needs, aspirations, or possibilities of human nature. The ideal ministry is not even to be measured by the demands, dreams, or expectations of the churches. The ideal of the Church is apt to be a ministry that fills and manages large and busy buildings, undertakes much, and is kind, even to softness; whereas the dominant note of the New Testament, and especially of Christ’s teaching, is love’s severity. In His lifetime at least, Christ alienated far more than He drew, and made trouble for almost everybody who touched Him. The early Protestants described themselves not as servants even of the Church, but as V.D.M., *Verbi divini ministri*. They served the Gospel rather than the Church, and the Church for the Gospel’s sake. A man is an ideal minister not by his success with the public but by his stewardship of the word, by his adequacy and fidelity to Him that called him.” P. T. Forsyth

“The ideal minister must love and understand the people, but he must know and love still more the will and word of God, and he must escape the snare of an immoderate desire to be beloved. God does not give that to all His servants. And our Lord Himself was above it through His soul’s satisfaction in the love of the Father.” P. T. Forsyth

“We must all preach *to* our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up a mirror to the times.” P. T. Forsyth

“If ever people were starving for a God the size of God, surely it is now. Give them a God who is holy, independent, and unlike us, a God who is good, just, full of wrath, and

full of mercy. Give them a God who is sovereign, powerful, tender and true. Give them a God with edges. Give them an undiluted God who makes them feel cherished and safe, and small and uncomfortable too. Give them a God who works all things after the counsel of his will and for the glory of his name. Give them a God whose love is lavish and free. Give them a God worthy of wonder and fear, a God big enough for all our faith, hope, and love. Do your friends, your church, your family, your children know that God is the center of the universe? Can they see that he is at the center of your life?" Kevin DeYoung

QUOTES FOR UNDERSTANDING ISAIAH 40

“Of key significance are the two passages, in chapters 6 and 40, in which Isaiah finds himself summoned into the presence of God to receive a specific commission. Both the nature of these passages and their strategic location confirm their great importance for an understanding of the book’s major themes. The first commits Isaiah to a ministry of judgment, the second to a ministry of comfort; and these become the dominant notes of the first and second halves of the book respectively. It is a book about demolition and reconstruction, judgment and salvation. And the order is significant, paradoxically, salvation emerges out of judgment and is possible only because of it.” Barry Webb

“This opening part of chapter 40 is like the overture to a great musical composition. All the major themes which the following chapters will develop so powerfully get their first exploratory treatment here: comfort (1), atonement (2), the way of the Lord (3), the glory of the Lord (5), and the power of the word of...God (8), the city of God (9), and the might and tenderness of Zion’s savior (10-11). It leaves us full of expectation that a whole new movement in God’s dealings with his people is about to unfold.” Barry Webb

“There is tension in the air, because an urgent call to action has been issued, and so far no one has responded. Who of us cannot remember being in such a situation on countless occasions? It is the point at which people begin to squirm in their seats and everyone avoids the speaker’s eye. Then at last someone speaks. *What shall I cry?* he says (6b). He is not so much volunteering as acknowledging that he is the one whom the speaker has had in mind all the time. These are his prophetic credentials. He has stood in God’s council and heard God calling him to the specific ministry which he now takes up. The identity of the unnamed prophet in this passage is provided elsewhere in the book. Isaiah’s foundational call has already been described in chapter 6; this is his recommissioning for the second phase of his work. Once again he finds himself caught up into the presence of God, and hears not only the voice of God himself, but the cries of the mighty beings who surround his throne. His response here (*What shall I cry?*) is the counterpart of his earlier cry (*For how long, O Lord?*). There he was summoned to a ministry of judgment; here to one of comfort. The former ministry was to continue ‘Until cities lie ruined and without inhabitant...until the Lord has sent everyone far away...’ (6:11-12). The present ministry is to be directed to those who have experienced the full outworking of that judgment.” Barry Webb

“Isaiah’s new message is for people whose whole world has been shattered. And for people like that, cheap comfort is not only a waste of time, it is cruel. Comfort that is not grounded in reality is no comfort at all. But the word that Isaiah is commissioned to bring to them is not like that at all; it is based on truth at every point.” Barry Webb

“Could fifty, sixty, or seventy years of exile pay for rebellion that had gone on for scores of generations? Could it atone even for the sins of those directly affected, let alone for those of their ancestors? The fact of the matter is that there is far more to this announcement of pardon than first meets the eye. There is a mystery here that will not be explained fully until chapter 53. But for now the simple announcement is allowed to stand alone in all its stark and bold splendor. You are forgiven! Your sin has been paid

for! Your hard labor is over! What more comforting truth could there be for shattered people than that?" Barry Webb

"The person who cannot rest his or her whole weight on the word of God can never know peace, for in the last analysis it can be found nowhere else than in a trusting relationship with the God who made us and rightly claims us as his own. Reliance on the word of God is not fatalistic or superstitious. It is not trust in something impersonal like the stars or a good-luck charm. It is trust in a person who is committed to us and has all the resources necessary to care for us. It is *the word of our God* that Isaiah speaks of, a word or message that arises from a relationship. And the truth is that God's word has the same character as God himself. It is as unchanging and reliable as the God who speaks it." Barry Webb

"A note is struck here which will recur more and more clearly as the book moves to its climax. The Lord is a missionary God; what he does for his own, he does not for their sake alone, but that all may come to know him." Barry Webb

"This verse [Isa 40:17] does not say that humankind is counted nothing 'by him' but *before him*, i.e. in relation and comparison to what he is. *Nothing* is 'nonexistence' and *less than nothing* is *epes* ('partaking of non-entity', 'extremity', 'terminus', 'the point at which a thing moves from being to non-being')." J. A. Motyer

"*The Holy One* is here [Isa 40:25] an adjective without the definite article, as though 'Holy' were another name for the Lord: 'Holy keeps saying'. (Cf. the plural adjective as a divine epithet in Ho. 11:12; Pr. 9:10; 30:3) J. A. Motyer

"The wrong inference from God's transcendence is that he is too great to care; the right one is that he is too great to fail." J. A. Motyer

"It's tempting to read such sections of Scripture [Isaiah chapters 2,13,16,23, and 40] and think of God as a petty, pouting glory hog who can't stand the thought of someone else getting the attention he wants. But it's not an issue of God's insecurity. It's an issue of God's supremacy. It is the economics of glory. When man's glory is raised against God's, the bottom line of the riches of God's glory reveals the utter bankruptcy of man's. These texts are warnings given to kings and nations who can't do the math of the universe and have miscalculated their significance and power to the intentional neglect of ascribing to God his immeasurable value. They rejoice in the work of their hands, the brilliance of their plans, and the displays of their power, intentionally oblivious and indifferent to the surpassing greatness, brilliance, and power of God. Imagine attending the 2014 New Year's fireworks show in Dubai, which, at a cost of nearly six million dollars, was the largest the world has ever seen. As you gaze into the sky in amazement, feeling the rumblings in your chest from the explosions, some kid yanks on your pant leg and tries to sell you a ticket for a viewing of the Roman candle he is about to set off. He's cute, but he's confused and has missed the point. His Roman candle is laughable and will barely be visible in the glow of six million dollars' worth of fireworks. This is what God is getting at and what the prophet Isaiah is helping us see. We are the glory hogs with our little Roman candles; God's just a realist." J. R. Vassar

“To wait on him is to admit that we have no other help, either in ourselves or in another. Therefore we are helpless until he acts. By the same token, to wait on him is to declare our confidence in his eventual action on our behalf. Thus waiting (qawa) in Hebrew is not merely killing time but a life of confident expectation (see 8:17; 25:9; 33:2; 49:23; 64:2). Those who give up their own frantic efforts to save themselves and turn expectantly to God will be able to *replace* or exchange (yaha lipu) their worn-out strength for new strength. How like God: he takes the useless and gives back the good (53:11). ...One should probably take the pair of running and walking not as opposed to each other but in concert to refer to the steady forward progress of those whose resources are limitless. As the second member of the parallel pair, *walk* gives definition to the concept, showing that it is the total process, not just the temporary bursts of hyperactivity, that depends on the divine supply.” John Oswalt

“There are pastors who derive their confidence from their competence. That is, their ministries ‘work,’ sometimes spectacularly so, in organizational growth and, so far as it can be measured, in lives changed. Despairing of such proof, ministers are tempted to settle for an authority and legitimation that derives from the approval of peers, or from occasional expressions of gratitude from those who are helped in one way or another. ...In the times when we his ministers feel useless, uncertain, and devoid of authority, we can seek several remedies. We can find dignity in representing to the world two thousand years of a formidably impressive tradition, and that is no little thing. We can find worth in the good done for clients, even if the community is misguided in its ultimate hope. We can find satisfaction in competencies exercised, even if the voice that we once heard call us to the work now seems to have been an illusion. There are many justifications for ministry in which we can find dignity, worth, and satisfaction, but finally the justification for Christian ministry is derived from him who forbids us to seek our authority from any existent reality short of the reality of his Kingdom come.” Richard John Neuhaus

“This is the heart of liberated and liberating ministry: to know that our ministry and the goal of our ministry are gifts. We do not need to sniff around the secular criterion in order to be assured that our ministries are legitimated. We and the work we have been given to do are already legitimated and justified by the grace of God.” Richard John Neuhaus

“Jesus Christ alone is the hope, treasure, joy, and purpose of pastoral ministry. Not church growth, not church planting, not church success, not church business, not church programs, not church activities, not church popularity. Let everything be a means to this end; the treasuring of Christ and the enjoying of his glory.” Jared Wilson

“Grown-up pastors walk with a limp. They have had their feet knocked out from under them at some point and discovered that God is still good all the time. Grown-up pastors have developed healthy habits over time that cultivate godliness in their lives. Grown-up pastors are not impetuous. They are not drawn to this fad and that, or trying to impress you with experiential razzle-dazzle and tomfoolery. Grown-up pastors know that the gospel is the only power to save, and that it is of first importance, so that in their maturity they have grown weary of putting on airs or putting on shows or putting on millstones.” Jared Wilson

“In our other activities, we can be tempted to think success depends on us. If we host enough youth retreats, sing our hymns heartily enough, or cut enough of our neighbor’s grass, then our church will surely grow. If we invite enough people, train enough people, mobilize enough people, then we’ll surely see results in our community. These things may be good. But coming together to pray reminds us the flourishing of Christ’s church does not depend ultimately on us. In prayer, we humbly extend what Thomas Manton called ‘the empty hand of the soul...[which] looketh for all from God.’ We take as our example the members of the early church who ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42). They prayed together when they ate (Acts 2:46), and when they were fasting (Acts 13:2-3). They prayed together when they were threatened with persecution (Acts 4:23-31), and when they were appointing new elders (Acts 14:23). They prayed together in formal temple worship services (Acts 3:1), and at riverside prayer meetings (Acts 16:13, 16). Those first Christians faced an enormous workload: gospel-proclaiming, disciple-making, church-planting, and widow-feeding. By prioritizing prayer together, they admitted their ultimate weakness and found their unfailing help in God.” Meghan Hill

THE MEANING AND PRIORITY OF HOLINESS IN THE CHURCH

“Holiness is not a series of do’s and don’ts, but conformity to the character of God and obedience to the will of God.” Jerry Bridges

“Holiness does not consist in mystic speculations, enthusiastic fervors, or uncommanded austerities; it consists in thinking as God thinks, and willing as God wills.” John Brown (Scottish theologian)

“We do not pursue holiness as the means of salvation; we pursue holiness as the fruit of salvation.” Jared Wilson

“Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. Because He is holy, all His attributes are holy; that is, whatever we think of as belonging to God must be thought of as holy. God is holy and He has made holiness the moral condition necessary to the health of His universe. Sin’s temporary presence in the world only accents this. Whatever is holy is healthy; evil is a moral sickness that must end ultimately in death.” A. W. Tozer

“God is holy with an absolute holiness that knows no degrees, and this He cannot impart to His creatures. But there is a relative and contingent holiness which He shares with angels and seraphim in heaven and with redeemed men on earth as their preparation for heaven. This holiness God can and does impart to His children. He shares it with them by imputation and by impartation, and because He has made it available to them through the blood of the Lamb, He requires it of them. To Israel first and later to His church God spoke, saying, ‘Be ye holy; for I am holy.’ He did not say ‘Be ye as holy as I am holy,’ for that would be to demand of us absolute holiness, something that belongs to God alone. Before the uncreated fire of God’s holiness angels veil their faces. Yea, the heavens are not clean, and the stars are not pure in His sight. No honest man can say ‘I am holy,’ but neither is any honest man willing to ignore the solemn words of the inspired writer, ‘Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.’ Caught in this dilemma, what are we Christians to do? We must like Moses cover ourselves with faith and humility while we steal a quick look at the God whom no man can see and live. The broken and the contrite heart He will not despise. We must hide our unholiness in the wounds of Christ as Moses hid himself in the cleft of the rock while the glory of God passed by. We must take refuge from God in God. Above all we must believe that God sees us perfect in His Son while He disciplines and chastens and purges us that we may be partakers of His holiness. By faith and obedience, by constant meditation on the holiness of God, by loving righteousness and hating iniquity, by a growing acquaintance with the Spirit of holiness, we can acclimate ourselves to the fellowship of the saints on earth and prepare ourselves for the eternal companionship of God and the saints above.” A. W. Tozer

“Don’t think of Christianity as *having* to do what a peevish God wants. Think of it as now being *able* to do what a good God demands. Through union with Christ we are empowered for holiness.” Kevin DeYoung

“We must always remember that in seeking after holiness we are not so much seeking after a thing as we are seeking a person. The blessings of the gospel – election, justification, sanctification, glorification, and all the rest – have been deposited in no other treasury but Christ. We don’t just want holiness. We want the Holy One in whom we have been counted holy and are now being made holy. To run hard after holiness is another way of running hard after God. Just as a once-for-all, objective justification leads to a slow-growth, subjective sanctification, so our unchanging *union* with Christ leads to an ever-increasing *communion* with Christ.” Kevin DeYoung

“A passion for holiness makes you some kind of weird holdover from a bygone era. As soon as you share your concern about swearing or about avoiding certain movies or about modesty or sexual purity or self-control or just plain godliness, people look at you like you have a moralistic dab of cream cheese on your face from the 1950s.” Kevin DeYoung

“There are a hundred good things you may be called to pursue as a Christian. All I’m saying is that, according to the Bible, holiness for every single Christian, should be right at the top of that list. We need more Christians on our campuses, in our cities, and in our seminaries who will say with Paul, ‘Look carefully then how you walk. ...If the war on poverty is worth fighting, how much more the war on your own sin? The fact of the matter is, if you read through the instructions to the New Testament churches you will find few explicit commands that tell us to take care of the needy in our communities and no explicit commands to do creation care, but there are dozens and dozens of verses that enjoin us, in one way or another, to be holy as God is holy (e.g. 1 Pet 1:13-16).” Kevin DeYoung

“You can think of holiness, to employ a metaphor, as the sanctification of your body. The mind is filled with the knowledge of God and fixed on what is good. The eyes turn away from sensuality and shudder at the sight of evil. The mouth tells the truth and refuses to gossip, slander, or speak what is coarse or obscene. The spirit is earnest, steadfast, and gentle. The heart is full of joy instead of hopelessness, patience instead of irritability, kindness instead of anger, humility instead of pride, and thankfulness instead of envy. The sexual organs are pure, being reserved for the privacy of marriage between one man and one woman. The feet move toward the lowly and away from senseless conflict, divisions, and wild parties. The hands are quick to help those in need and ready to fold in prayer. This is the anatomy of holiness.” Kevin DeYoung

“Heart transformation, not behavioral and environmental clean-up projects, is the key to true righteousness. Boundaries to help maintain purity are both wise and necessary, but they are not the ultimate answer. The ultimate answer is inside. It comes from inside, where the Holy Spirit resides to empower us; and it comes from above, where Christ’s blood cleanses us as we confess our sins (1 John 1:9).” Tom Hovestol

“In recent years the impact of legalism has lessened in many arenas of the church. But in its place has not always been a return to authentic Christianity. Rather, it seems to me that libertinism has blossomed like a weed on the land. The statistics from every source tell us that we Christians are more or less clones of our secular culture, and in some cases even worse.” Tom Hovestol

“How do we avoid spiritual sickness and pursue genuine spiritual fitness? First, we ought to specialize far more on spiritual cardiology than spiritual dermatology. We should not be content with right answers without right hearts. We should examine our motives as much as we seek to have proper outward behavior.” Tom Hovestol

“The very idea of a man being ‘sanctified,’ while no holiness can be seen in his life, is flat nonsense and a misuse of words. Light may be very dim; but if there is only a spark in a dark room it will be seen. Life may be very feeble; but if the pulse only beats a little, it will be felt. It is just the same with a sanctified man; his sanctification will be something felt and seen, though he himself may not understand it. A ‘saint’ in whom nothing can be seen but worldliness or sin, is a kind of monster not recognized in the Bible.” J. C. Ryle

“What could an unsanctified man do in heaven, if by chance he got there? Let that question be fairly looked in the face, and fairly answered. No man can possibly be happy in a place where he is not in his element, and where all around him is not congenial to his tastes, habits, and character. When an eagle is happy in an iron cage, when a sheep is happy in the water, when an owl is happy in the blaze of noonday sun, when a fish is happy on the dry land – then, and not until then, will I admit that the unsanctified man could be happy in heaven.” J. C. Ryle

“*Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God*, according as we find His mind described in Scripture. It is the habit of agreeing in God’s judgment – hating what He hates – loving what He loves - and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word. He who most entirely agrees with God, he is the most holy man.” J. C. Ryle

“Every need is there in order to rouse the need for God. And we need God chiefly, not as a means to an end, not to satisfy earthly need, to keep the world going, to comfort us, or to help us to the higher moral levels. We do not need God chiefly as a means even to our own holiness. But we need God for himself. He himself is the end.” P. T. Forsyth

ISAIAH, HOLINESS, AND OUR GOSPEL WITNESS

“God does not deliver his servants so that they can revel in the experience of sharing his glory (Chs. 60-62). Rather, he delivers them so that they can be witnesses of that glory to the world (6:1-10). This has been the understanding of servanthood since 2:2-5. That is why chs. 56-66 end as they began, with an announcement of the incorporation of the nations into the holy people, and not with ch. 62 (or ch. 55). This book is not about the vindication of Zion, but about the mission of Zion to declare the God whose glory fills the earth (6:3; 66:18) to all the inhabitants of that earth (12:4; 51:5; 60:9; 66:19).” John Oswalt

“Isaiah cannot praise and serve God as the seraphs do [in Isaiah 6] because, in the depths of his being, he is unclean, just as his compatriots are. It is remarkable to see the prophet identify himself so completely with those whose sins he has been denouncing in the previous chapters. But in the presence of God degrees of sin become irrelevant. It is the holiness of God which reveals to us our true condition, not comparison with others. Paradoxically, Isaiah’s confession of being unclean like his fellows has set him apart from them, for he, unlike them, has been willing to acknowledge his condition” J. A. Motyer

“The issue in evangelism is not one of attracting sinners to divine benefits (the question, “Don’t you want to accept Christ?”), but to bring them face to face with the issue: “Do you want God to accept you?”” Michael Horton

“Our reaction to the sinful world around us, however, must be more than just defensive. We must be concerned not only for our own purity of mind and heart, but also for the eternal destiny of those who would pollute us. God has left us in the world to be both salt and light (Matt. 5:13-14).” Jerry Bridges

“Christ’s command to ‘go’ has not been rescinded. Perhaps we as a church may need less church programming and more equipping and encouragement to be in the business of building redemptive relationships outside the confines of the church. We also can offer common courtesy to those we want to tell about Jesus. People seem both startled and softened when we show them the simple kindness of taking an interest in them on their stomping grounds.” Tom Hovestol

“If ever people were starving for a God the size of God, surely it is now. Give them a God who is holy, independent, and unlike us, a God who is good, just, full of wrath, and full of mercy. Give them a God who is sovereign, powerful, tender and true. Give them a God with edges. Give them an undiluted God who makes them feel cherished and safe, and small and uncomfortable too. Give them a God who works all things after the counsel of his will and for the glory of his name. Give them a God whose love is lavish and free. Give them a God worthy of wonder and fear, a God big enough for all our faith, hope, and love. Do your friends, your church, your family, your children know that God is the center of the universe? Can they see that he is at the center of your life?” Kevin DeYoung

“The most important thing we can say about shalom and about the new heavens and new earth is that they are only to be obtained by those who have been redeemed through the blood of the resurrected Lord Jesus. Therefore, even if we *could* wrap an entire city in shalom [through “social justice” activities] and push it over the threshold of eternity, the citizens of that city would not go with it unless they had heard from our lips and believed the gospel of the Lord Jesus.” Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert

“The attractional church sees evangelism mainly happening inside the church building, so the attractional attempts are myriad and always increasing. A simple church may also emphasize ‘inside evangelism’, but in cutting the programmatic bloat they also free up their people during the week to engage their neighbors outside the church.”
Jared Wilson

“Our evangelistic task is not to persuade people that the gospel was made for their felt needs, but that they were made for the soul satisfying glory of God in the gospel.”
John Piper

“Evangelism means depicting the beauty of Christ and his saving work with a heartfelt urgency of love that labors to help people find their satisfaction in him. The most important common ground with unbelievers is not culture but creation, not momentary felt needs but massive real needs. Augustine’s famous prayer is all important: ‘You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace till they rest in you.’ If a person realizes that the image of God in man is man’s ineffably profound fitness to image forth Christ’s glory through everlasting joy in God, then he will not gut the great gospel of its inner life and power. The gospel is not the good news that God makes much of me; it is ‘the gospel of the glory of Christ.’” John Piper

“Reducing what God is doing in the world to missions emasculates how God, in his passionate mission, calls and uses his people in their various vocations. God’s mission of restoration enlists people to carry out all sorts of redemptive tasks – from engineering to parenting, research, medical practice, politics, finances, agriculture, and countless other labors. All of Jesus’ followers, no matter what their tasks assigned by God, can confidently labor in Jesus’ name as those sent by God to make the world a better place and to display God’s character, i.e., to glorify God.” J. Nelson Jennings

“Cross-cultural missions also take place in unorganized fashion: ‘There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles...Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word’ (Acts 8:1, 4). Later Luke records, ‘Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 11:19-20). These cross-cultural missions were not organized Christian activities: they were refugee movements. Similarly, throughout history up until today it has been as immigrants, students and teachers, business people, political emissaries, and as those performing numerous other functions that Christians have been involved in cross-cultural gospel ministry, or missions.” J. Nelson Jennings

“The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore - on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him ‘meek and mild,’ and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. ...Let us, in heaven’s name, drag out the divine drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. ...It is the dogma that is the drama - not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death - but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.” Dorothy Sayers

HOLINESS, HONESTY, HUMILITY, AND HOPE

“It is time for us Christians to face up to our responsibility for holiness. Too often we say we are ‘defeated’ by this or that sin. No, we are not defeated; we are simply disobedient! It might be well if we stopped using the terms ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ to describe our progress in holiness. Rather we should use the terms ‘obedience’ and ‘disobedience.’ When I say I am defeated by some sin, I am unconsciously slipping out from under my responsibility. I am saying something outside of me has defeated me. But when I say I am disobedient, that places the responsibility for my sin squarely on me. We may, in fact, be defeated, but the reason we are defeated is because we have chosen to disobey. We have chosen to entertain lustful thoughts, or to harbor resentment, or to shade the truth a little. We need to brace ourselves up, and to realize that we are responsible for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We need to reckon on the fact that we died to sin’s reign, that it no longer has any dominion over us, that God has united us with the risen Christ in all His power, and has given us the Holy Spirit to work in us. Only as we accept our responsibility and appropriate God’s provisions will we make any progress in our pursuit of holiness.” Jerry Bridges

“The question we must ask in a serious pursuit of holiness is this: ‘Am I willing to develop convictions from the Scriptures, and to live by these convictions?’ This is often where the rub comes. We hesitate to face up to God’s standard of holiness in a specific area of life. We know that to do so will require obedience that we are unwilling to give.” Jerry Bridges

“Isaiah was a prophet of God, walking in the righteousness of God’s commandments. Yet on seeing the Lord God in His holiness, he was compelled to cry out, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts’ (Isaiah 6:5). As we grow in the *knowledge* of God’s holiness, even though we are also growing in the *practice* of holiness it seems the gap between our knowledge and our practice always gets wider. This is the Holy Spirit’s way of drawing us to more and more holiness.” Jerry Bridges

“To despair of our unholiness is a great sign of holiness in the making. It means we are coming to the end of ourselves.” Jared Wilson

“So what is the antidote to the poison of self-righteousness? We must see ourselves as we really are. We must allow God’s Word and His Spirit to do spiritual surgery on our hearts. We must recognize our human tendency to cover up, hide, and blame others for our sin, a diabolical trio of evils we have perfected since the Garden of Eden. To do this we must steadfastly resist enormous cultural and ecclesiastical pressures. The best means to see ourselves as we really are is not through comparison with others nor morbid introspection, but by deliberately getting with God. And when we see ourselves truly, against the standard of Jesus, pride has no place! Honesty with ourselves and with God should lead to honesty with others about ourselves. We cannot project a false image of spirituality. For us to tell only the successes of our lives and not the struggles and failures removes us from a significant means to relate to people and to reach them effectively.” Tom Hovestol

“It’s also by his grace that our imperfect obedience is acceptable in his sight. And even the smallest act of obedience is an event worth celebrating. Perhaps we are slow to see any good in us because we don’t understand how bad we were. Your tiny spiritual life may seem less negligible when you consider that it comes from a heart that used to be spiritually dead. That you and I have any law-abiding willing and doing is a miracle of God’s grace. ...It’s easy to become convinced that we can never change or that God is ready to kick us to the curb after we’ve screwed up in the same way for the millionth time. But don’t listen to yourself; preach to yourself. Go back to the gospel.” Kevin DeYoung

“There is always, in all natural morality, the taint, the disease of *self-righteousness*. The moral life that is lived out on a basis of self-confidence over its inward source of goodness, whose standards are self-referential, and whose confidence is in the self, is a moral life that is suffused by sin.” David Wells

“Ritual holiness is not holiness at all. Isaiah says (65:5 and 1:15) that it is nothing but an attempt to make oneself acceptable in God’s sight (those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves), whereas true holiness is a gift from God (59:15b-21; 63:1-6) that is lived out in obedience.” John Oswalt

“Contempt is a warning light of self-righteousness. How do we regard sinners who do not measure up and saints who have blown it? Do we subconsciously gloat over their misdeeds and glory in their shame? Do we subtly believe that we are incapable of their level of depravity and they are unlikely to achieve our level of goodness? Are we arrogant about our own avoidances and achievements? For me the answer is yes, and then some. I rarely verbalize these thoughts, or even acknowledge them to myself. But they are there. They surface in my secret reflections and in what I mutter under my breath. They come out in unguarded conversations about people not present. They pop out in my prayers as I lament the evils of the culture more than personal and corporate sin.” Tom Hovestol

“Developing a relationship with Christ often begins with holy dissatisfaction. When we look at others, we may become smug, but when we look inward and upward, we are righteously appalled. We come to a place where we are not satisfied with our present state and long to know Christ better.” Tom Hovestol

“In moralistic religions, the purpose is to enhance and improve the unregenerate; in Christianity, the goal is to slay the sinner, only to raise him or her from the dead.” Michael Horton

“War with sin and doubt, guilt and depression, are not signs of defeat, but proof of Christ’s victory. After all, those who are not baptized into Christ by the Spirit are at peace with sin and unbelief. The absence of war within is true only of people in one of two states: unregenerate or glorified. The believer is presently in neither. Such conflict is not the evidence that one is a ‘carnal Christian’ but is the genuine experience of every believer throughout the course of this life. True faith does not run ahead of God’s plan as if we were already enjoying paradise. It looks for the crown at the end. Meanwhile it

is willing to fasten the trembling hand to Jesus, who 'humbled himself and became obedient to death – even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8)" Michael Horton

"For my part I am persuaded the more light we have, the more we see our own sinfulness: the nearer we get to heaven, the more we are clothed with humility." J. C. Ryle

"Just as a parent is pleased with the efforts of his little child to please him, though it be only by picking a daisy or walking across the room, so is our Father in heaven pleased with the poor performance of His believing children. He looks at the motive, principle, and intention of their actions, and not merely at their quantity and quality." J. C. Ryle

"The best of Christians is a poor frail creature. But the least and lowest of believers will find that he is counted among Christ's servants, and that his labor has not been in vain in the Lord. He will discover to his amazement, that his Master's eye saw more beauty in his efforts to please Him, than he ever saw himself. He will find that every hour spent in Christ's service, and every word spoken on Christ's behalf, has been written in a book of remembrance. Let believers remember these things and take courage—The cross may be heavy now, but the glorious reward shall make amends for all." J. C. Ryle

"His eye can discern excellence in the least thing which is a fruit of His own Spirit. He can pick out the grains of gold from amidst the dross of your performances, and sift the wheat from amidst the chaff, in all your doings. Your tears are all put into His bottle. Your endeavors to do good to others, however feeble, are written in His book of remembrance. The least cup of cold water given in His name shall not lose its reward. He does not forget your work and labour of love, however little the world may regard it." J. C. Ryle

"It is the excellence of a holy man that he is not at peace with indwelling sin, as others are. He hates it, mourns over it, and longs to be free from its company. The work of sanctification within him is like the wall of Jerusalem – the building goes forward 'even in troublous times.' (Dan. 9:25)." J. C. Ryle

"He that would understand the nature of true holiness must know that the Christian is 'a man of war.' If we would be holy we must fight." J. C. Ryle

"Would you be holy? Then Christ is the manna you must daily eat, like Israel in the wilderness of old. Would you be holy? Then Christ must be the rock from which you must daily drink the living water. Would you be holy? Then you must be ever looking unto Jesus – looking at His cross, and learning fresh motives for a closer walk with God – looking at His example, and taking Him for your pattern. Looking at Him, you would become like Him. Looking at Him, your face would shine without your knowing it. Look less at yourself and more at Christ, and you will find besetting sins dropping off and leaving you, and your eyes enlightened more and more every day. (Heb. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18)" J. C. Ryle

LEGALISM VERSUS HOLINESS

There are two kinds of legalism. While different in important ways, one factor links them: they both oppose God's holiness. The core of legalism is the self-reliant attempt to use laws (whether from God or humans) to gain favor with God. True holiness does not work that way.

The first form of legalism concerns justification. In this case, people think they earn a right standing before God by their good works. Even if they put Jesus in the mix, the approach is deadly. Paul wrote to the Galatians that they were foolish and bewitched because they started to listen to teachers pushing that idea (Gal 1:6-10; 3:1-9).

Saved sinners are justified by God's grace alone. We receive the gift through faith alone. We do not *earn* anything; we *turn* to Jesus to rescue us (Rom 3:21-4:5; Eph 2:1-10; I Thess 1:2-10; 2 Tim 1:8-14).

The second form of legalism concerns sanctification. Positional sanctification means having a holy standing before God. Our positional sanctification came to us (as did justification) by God's decree. We had nothing to do with it. Progressive sanctification means growing in holy conduct. Our progressive sanctification does involve our actions, but we act by the power of grace, not law, as Paul makes clear in Romans 6.

Even well-meaning believers and pastors can drift into a legalistic pursuit of holiness. Some create laws where God has not. This kind of legalism predates the Christian era.

Certain forms of Judaism multiplied rules. In a document titled "The Sayings of the Fathers," we read: "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberative in judgment, make many disciples and build a fence around the Torah." Their fence was stricter than the law. They figured that not breaking the fence kept people from even touching God's law. One example said you could not spit on the ground on the Sabbath because that moved dirt, and that is plowing, which is work, and work is forbidden on the Sabbath. The elevators in the hospital where my daughter was born stopped on every floor and the doors opened so orthodox Jews did not have to "work" on Saturday by pushing the buttons.

Jesus punched through that tradition-based fence many times, which made the Pharisees fight him. Jesus never violated God's law. He fulfilled God's law for us, sacrificed himself for us, died for us, rose for us, and ascended for us to bring us to God the holy Father. Paul told Pastor Timothy to oppose legalistic fencing in order to "be a good servant of Christ" (I Timothy 4).

Even people who profess faith in Jesus can slip into legalism. The Old Order River Brethren in Pennsylvania made similar moves to the Jewish fence builders. They crafted many community rules. Women must wear white cotton head coverings and long dresses in solid color or with very small print. Men must wear broad-brimmed black or

straw hats. Cars used to be forbidden but have been allowed since 1954. The first bishop to permit using cars, however, was excommunicated. Men wear beards. Unlike the Amish, some men sport mustaches. Electricity is fine. They use microwave ovens. Television is out but the internet is in.

Those self-created rules stray from the grace-based sanctification their own hymnal celebrates. One such hymn says:

“My soul, no more attempt to draw
Thy life and comfort from the law;
Fly to the hope the gospel gives;
The man that trusts the promise lives.”

Their legalism failed to walk that talk.

Colossians 2:8-10 says: “Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ. For the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily in Christ, and you have been filled by him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.” Colossians 2:16-21 says: “Therefore, don’t let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ. Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind. They don’t hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with growth from God. If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: ‘Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch’?”

A friend of mine grew up in a rules-saturated Baptist family. His grandmother used to warn him about worldliness. She would wag her finger at him and say, “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch.” Grandma’s agenda put her church culture ahead of reading verses in context. Colossians 2:22-23 adds: “All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines. Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.”

The River Brethren baptized converts by immersion in any weather. It is cold in Pennsylvania in the winter. Did they postpone outdoor baptism to the spring? No. They would break the ice on a river to baptize people. They practiced triple-dunking for each person even in frigid water. They believed that baptizing in freezing water displayed dedication.

When it comes to harsh treatment of the body, few can match Benedetto Giuseppe Labre who was granted sainthood in the Roman Catholic Church in 1854. The official transcript of that action says: “He was a model of humility, abstinence, and mortification,

taking only for food remains of cabbage, lemon peel, or lettuce leaves, which he picked up on the streets. He even ate, once, some spoiled soup which he found on a dunghill.”

Rules-oriented religion can pop up in any denomination or unaffiliated group that professes Christian faith.

Examples abound in fundamentalist church circles. I have seen my share. The rules often take the form of prohibitions.

The church in which I was saved did not allow members to dance, play cards, or go to movies. Another church ran an elementary school and said teachers must not serve red drinks because they looked like wine. In a conservative college, men were not allowed to wear mustaches. When a male dorm student wanted his brother to sleep over for one night, the school said the brother could stay for the night but only if he shaved off his mustache. I attended a mid-week service in a church that had a covenant on the front wall. It said that members must not drink alcohol in any form. The song leader had a pack of Marlboros sticking out of his shirt pocket. Many people lit cigarettes on the front porch after the service. The church was in tobacco country. I wondered if some church in the Sonoma Valley ruled out cigarettes but members sipped wine on the portico after the services.

Such rule generators build razor-wire fences around the Bible and true grace. An article in “Aviation Week and Space Technology” reflected on Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s. An aerospace industry expert said: “The practice of the U.S. and its allies of surrounding their high security sites with barbed or razor wire was like drawing a circle around important targets for potential foes.” Fence-building legalism plays into the hands of our worst enemy because it distracts from the true pursuit of holiness by grace.

People may have good intentions while imposing extra-biblical rules on people regarding food, drink, and entertainment. But good intentions do not prevent bad results. It is proper to teach people to use good judgment as they pursue sanctification. It is not good to judge people for breaking spiritual rules that God did not generate.

The Apostle Paul coached pastor Titus as he served on Crete. In Titus 2:11-15 Paul wrote that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works. Proclaim these things; encourage and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

Both legalism and license oppose holiness because they are common. People commonly construct religions with fences and commonly chart their own course apart from God’s revealed will. To be holy means to be set apart. Be different. Be holy.

QUOTES ABOUT LEGALISM

“The goal of sanctification is not the creation of an independent human quality, an object of admiration. That would be the most hideous form of pride, the exact opposite of the truly virtuous life. Virtues are indeed intrinsic values, but they cannot exist as qualities independent of a relationship to God.” Simon Chan

“When...sixteen packs of American cigarettes arrived in each of the Red Cross parcels, a complex moral problem was presented to the pious. What were they to do with them? Certainly their rigid law against smoking demanded that they should destroy these cigarettes—especially when they had refused to lend out their ration cards because smoking was sinful. On the other hand, it was very tempting not to destroy their cigarettes. Lucrative deals were now possible, since heavy smokers offered tins of milk, butter, and meat in exchange for a pack or two. Was a man not justified in trading them so that his children might have more to eat? Apparently the missionaries decided that he was. Almost all who had refused to lend out their ration cards before now exchanged their sixteen packs for the immense wealth of tins of milk or meat. To the cynical observer it almost seemed that to these pious associating themselves with smoking was not a sin if a profit was involved! On our cooking shift was a most pleasant, open, kind fundamentalist named Smithfield. He was a red-haired fellow, hard working, cheerful, and an excellent ballplayer. One day a fellow on our shift pressed him about how he dealt with the seemingly clear contradiction involved in the selling of cigarettes. ‘Look, Smithfield, if smoking is sinful, then how can you encourage it by trading cigarettes? And if [cigarettes] aren’t really so bad—which you seem certainly to believe by trading them—then why don’t you guys admit it, and let others use your cards to get an extra ration? You can’t have your milk and your virtue both, you know! You know what I think? I think you don’t feel they’re really wrong at all. Would you be a “pusher” of opium for milk as you now are of cigarettes? Of course you wouldn’t! No, you guys just talk a lot about cigarettes and those other vices because, by avoiding them, you’ve found a fairly painless way of being pious. You don’t really take your moral talk seriously at all, Smithfield!’ Smithfield, though an intelligent man, never saw any contradiction at all in what he did. ‘I don’t want them on my card because to use tobacco is sinful,’ he stated confidently, ‘and I’m not going to touch sin if I can help it. And as for the trading – I sold them for milk because my kids need milk. Isn’t that reason enough?’ I couldn’t help thinking that Smithfield’s sharp questioner had been on the right tack. It boiled down to how seriously the missionaries took their own moral code. Filled with all manner of relatively petty ‘do’s and don’ts’, that code seemed too trivial to bear the weight of righteousness which they sought to pump into it. What had happened, I decided, was that somehow in the development of the Protestant ethic, the magnificent goal of serving God within the world had been perverted or lost in the shuffle. Instead of bringing love and service into the world through his calling and his family life, the Protestant began to try to keep himself ‘holy’ in spite of the world. As he began to accept more and more of the world’s fundamental values of property, security, and prestige, inevitably the ‘holiness’ he sought in the world became more and more trivial. He ended by concentrating only on avoiding the vices which might prevent him from being respectable.” Langdon Gilkey (describing his experience in a Japanese prisoner-of-war compound in China during WWII).

"It is difficult to recreate the atmosphere of such a college in the 1960's. No doubt the incidents that loom so large in memory were not the whole of campus life. But the contrast between the pettiness of the issues that troubled us and the magnitude of the issues that were being dealt with in society is frightening. Campus life was circumscribed by cultural patterns and ethical mores called 'prudentials' at my college. These included the traditional Evangelical prohibitions against drinking, smoking, dancing, card-playing, and theater-going. Our lives were largely bound up in testing the limits of these prohibitions. While other students responded to calls for civil rights workers or took to the streets in protest about Vietnam, we fought our administration over whether the yearbook could picture male swimmers without T-shirts, struggled for the right to watch TV in the lounge on Sundays, and wondered if the Christian should attend the theater (legitimate or cinema) or read twentieth-century literature." Donald Dayton

"Reynolds objects to using Psalm 104 as if *wine* is the blessing from God. He argues rather that *grape juice* is implied: 'It is meaningful that in this passage the foods mentioned come from the earth... Yeast does not come from the earth in this sense. It may be air-borne.' He concludes that the passage is here speaking of 'bread and wine which have not been worked on by the micro-organisms we call yeast.' In this same context, he notes, 'Alcohol in wine is an additive, and is not a product of the earth. It comes rather from an air-borne micro-organism, and is not commended in Psalm 104:14-15.' ...I really doubt whether the technical, scientific specifics of airborne yeast transport is a concern to the psalmist. The airborne yeast, in fact, grows naturally on the skin of each grape; fermentation starts the moment the skin is broken, the moment the juice comes forth. Absent pasteurization, fermentation is unavoidable. Reynolds' view is simply unnatural. Besides that, where does yeast come from in the first place? It does not arrive here from space! It, too, is ultimately land-based, an organism created by God." Kenneth Gentry

"In support of mandatory total abstinence, prohibitionist Henry Morris argues that 'it is significant that nowhere does the Bible actually endorse the drinking of wine or other intoxicating drinks.' This statement is patently mistaken and demonstrates the all-too-frequent tendency among evangelicals to lightly review the scriptural data and proceed on intuitive feelings or some other criteria. *Yayin* ('wine'), which Morris himself concedes is a fermented beverage, is a gift righteous men exchange in godly circumstances (Gen. 14:18-20). It is an offering God requires in worship (Ex. 29:38, 40), is a blessing of God (Ps. 104:14-15), and symbolizes Messianic blessings (Is. 25:6). In fact, God removes it as an aspect of conventional curse (Deut. 28:39). Furthermore, even our Lord Jesus Christ drank wine (Luke 7:33-34), produced it through miraculous intervention (John 2:1-10), and instituted the Lord's Supper with it (Matt. 26:29)." Kenneth Gentry

"The 'Christian witness' argument cannot schizophrenically maintain that Christians are obligated to avoid that which Scripture allows! We detract from, not enhance, our witness if we promote a false morality, a morality presumably 'higher' than the Bible, a morality in *contradiction* to Scripture." Kenneth Gentry

"Principles of abstinence can go too far. Such a principle of conduct knows no limits and can lead to all manner of erroneous prohibitions, thereby becoming neo-Pharasaism."
Kenneth Gentry

IDOLS THEN AND NOW

For some key Bible passages about idolatry, see Lev 19:4, Deut 5:7-8; 6:14, Psa 81:9; 97:7, Isa 40:18-31, 41:1-29, 44:6-23; Jer 10:1-16; Hos 13:4, Matt 4:10, 1 Cor 5:11; 6:9-10; 10:7,14; Gal 5:19-20, Col 3:5, 1 Jn 5:21.

“Images are contrary to the divine will expressed in Yahweh’s covenant with Israel; they are thus an abomination. They make the people and nation using them unclean, and so they are likened to other sources of impurity: dung, detested things, dead bodies. They are useless and ineffective, they have no life in them, they are wood and stone, they are vapor and vanity. They are deceptive; they cannot do what their worshipers ask of them; they only disappoint and embarrass those who trust them.” Edward Curtis

“Central to idolatrous worship is the achievement of security through manipulation of personalized forces. But central to Israelite faith was the surrender of manipulative control and the acceptance of God’s grace, such acceptance being evidenced by a life like his, marked by ethical purity. This distinction between these two ways always posed a dilemma for the Israelites. To attempt to control one’s own destiny implied denial of God, but acceptance of God’s way meant a frightening relinquishment of power. Typically, they tried to keep both God and the gods, with unhappy results. For the most part, they did not consciously abandon God, but their attempt to keep both amounted to abandonment and was, in the eyes of the prophets, rebellion.” John Oswalt

“Idolatry is the worst sin of all, because it moves God to the periphery of our lives and puts something else in his place. It gives to something else the glory that should be God’s alone. Chameleon-like, it constantly disguises itself so that we are scarcely aware of its presence, even when we are most in the grip of it. Greed, Paul tells us, is idolatry, because it turns away from God towards things, and makes the pursuit of them the passion of our lives. The modern world is no less given over to idolatry than the ancient one; it is just that its cruder forms were more prevalent then.” Barry Webb

“Idolatry in its larger meaning is properly understood as any substitution of what is created for the creator. People may worship nature, money, mankind, power, history or social and political systems instead of the God who created them all. The New Testament writers, in particular, recognized that the relationship need not be explicitly one of cultic worship; a man can place anyone or anything at the top of his pyramid of values, and that is ultimately what he serves.” Herbert Schlossberg

“We are not the first generation that has attempted to trivialize God into a more manageable deity. However, because we live in a century notable for its loss of awe, its impatience with God’s silence, and its rampant individualism, we have perhaps failed in this sin more than others. We have fashioned gods to fit the contours of our desires and then bowed before them with religious abandon: the god-of-my-cause, god-of-my-understanding, god-of-my-experience, god-of-my-comfort, god-of-my-nation, and god-of-my-success have been our particular favorites.” Donald McCullough

“When it comes to the issue of idolatry, pastors and theologians often refer to ‘near’ and ‘far’ idols, or ‘source’ and ‘surface’ idols. Far idols, or source idols, are the few deep idols that rule our hearts, those we seek to secure for our identity and joy. These far idols consist of control, power, approval, and comfort. Near idols, or surface idols, are those we use in an attempt to secure our far idols. For example, if our far idol is comfort, we might use a near idol such as food or pornography as an escape, a way to secure that comfort. If our far idol is power, we might use the near idol of money to give us a sense of power.” J.R. Vassar

“My idols are much more personal than a piece of stone or a block of wood. Anything that shapes my identity or fills my thoughts with something other than God, especially on a regular, ongoing, irresistible basis, is an idol. Idolatry does not count the cost of worshiping anything but God. And although few of us could ever imagine worshiping a picture of ourselves, the reality is that we are either worshiping God or some form of ourselves. Of course, there are the typical idols that come to our mind quickly when we talk about this – things such as greed and lust. But another one that we don’t often talk about is the idol of the approval of others.” Ed Stetzer

“Am I just an idolater if I form my God from earth or stone or wood? Am I not an idolater if I use God’s Word like a vein of ore, or a stone quarry, or a stand of timber to cut down? When I take from God’s Word what seems good to me and depend on my human reason to assemble a god in the image of my own limited insight, is this not idolatry?” Eta Linnemann

“Man in his rebellion against the Creator remains incurably religious, and he seeks to satisfy this instinct by making his own deities. He much prefers these lifeless puppets to the one true living God, because they allow him to pull the strings.” Geoffrey B. Wilson

“Instead of believing that God created man after His image – so that He may demand of him a believing and holy lifestyle – man creates God in his image, ready to serve his own ambitions.” John Calvin

“Incorrect thinking about God’s character breeds idolatry. For instance, if we imagine a more docile, controllable god or a god that can be bent to our whim, we’re creating an idol. If we imagine a god who exists to pander to our fickle desires or who gives up in frustration because he can’t accomplish his will, we’re worshipping a false god. We must be careful to worship God as He has presented himself in Scripture.” Elyse Fitzpatrick

“We can become more aware of the thoughts and desires that ensnare us by asking, What do I want and fear? Or to put a finer point on it, What do I want and fear more than I want to reflect God and grow in holiness? What pleasure do you want so badly that you’re willing to sin in order to obtain it? What do you fear losing so much that you think nothing of sinning in order to hang on to it?” Elyse Fitzpatrick

“We would never consider anything so stupid as worshiping a rock or tree – but we frequently fall into the sin of worshiping a god of our imagination... a god who thinks just like us, whom we can command and manipulate for our pleasure.” Elyse Fitzpatrick

“The lies we commonly believe – lies that are peddled by Satan and the world – cloud our thinking about God’s true nature and the source of happiness. The lie that happiness can be found in something other than God is the fountainhead from which all our idolatry flows.” Elyse Fitzpatrick

“It is only in the power of the Spirit that we comprehend our enemy’s strengths and find the wisdom to tear down and destroy our idols, and the Spirit comes to the aid of those who humble themselves, recognizing their utter helplessness and crying out for His help in desperation. Confession of our neediness and sin humbles naturally proud hearts. Even though it’s difficult to humble yourself, remember God ‘resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (1 Peter 5:5).” Elyse Fitzpatrick

“The first battle will be fought on the field of prayer. Heartfelt, Spirit-led, and consistent confession and repentance is the only weapon that can weaken the strongholds that our idolatrous thoughts and desires occupy.” Elyse Fitzpatrick

“In our other activities, we can be tempted to think success depends on us. If we host enough youth retreats, sing our hymns heartily enough, or cut enough of our neighbor’s grass, then our church will surely grow. If we invite enough people, train enough people, mobilize enough people, then we’ll surely see results in our community. These things may be good. But coming together to pray reminds us the flourishing of Christ’s church does not depend ultimately on us. In prayer, we humbly extend what Thomas Manton called ‘the empty hand of the soul...[which] looketh for all from God.’ We take as our example the members of the early church who ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42). They prayed together when they ate (Acts 2:46), and when they were fasting (Acts 13:2-3). They prayed together when they were threatened with persecution (Acts 4:23-31), and when they were appointing new elders (Acts 14:23). They prayed together in formal temple worship services (Acts 3:1), and at riverside prayer meetings (Acts 16:13, 16). Those first Christians faced an enormous workload: gospel-proclaiming, disciple-making, church-planting, and widow-feeding. By prioritizing prayer together, they admitted their ultimate weakness and found their unfailing help in God.” Meghan Hill

MINISTRY AND IDOLATRY

“The church in any culture will need to attack all the cultural behaviors and beliefs that are incompatible with the gospel, just as ‘foreign’ missionaries have done. Because our Western churches are mission churches to our own pluralistic culture, we will have to loudly and clearly unmask the pagan practices and idolatry of the day. And we have to start the unmasking in our own churches.” Shane Lems

“Too often we envision ‘successful ministry’ – this vision may look different from person to person, church to church – and we pour our energies and affections into seeing that vision become a reality, assuming that once we finally ‘arrive’ things will be better, easier, and finally and ultimately fulfilling. This is, functionally, idolatry. It is a creation of a false heaven, not simply false in its falling short of the real paradise but false in its inclusion of talent, acquired skills, and grit to reach. Don’t settle for the false heaven of a ‘successful ministry.’ Because real success is faithfulness. Big church or small church, growing church or declining church, well-known church or obscure church – all churches are epic successes full of the eternal, invincible quality of the kingdom of God when they treasure Jesus’ gospel and follow him. Jesus did not give the keys of the kingdom with the ability to bind and loose on both sides of the veil only to those who reached a certain attendance benchmark. So do well, pursue excellence, and stay faithful. God will give you what you ought to have according to his wisdom and riches. The reality is that, there is no promised land until the Promised Land of the real heaven. We always think things will finally be...well, final when we get ‘there,’ wherever ‘there’ is for us. But there is no there. There’s only here. Because once you get there, there really becomes here, and there’s a new there. On and on it will go until our discontentment with ourselves is shaped by the contentment found in Christ and our yearning for this-worldly ‘theres’ is conquered by the vision of the everlasting ‘there.’” Jared Wilson

“It is a customary mantra of ministry that healthy things grow. And yet sometimes healthy things shrink. This is certainly true of our bodies, when we’re eating right and exercising. I mean, the formula doesn’t always work in every circumstance. ‘Healthy things grow’ sounds right. But cancer grows too. Jesus warned against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod precisely for this reason: we may mistake the rising of something for the health or success of the thing. So it’s possible to look big, to look successful, and to not actually be big or successful in the ways that matter. This is not a strike against having a megachurch. It’s only a strike against the idolatry of the megachurch. It’s a strike against a church of any size that is trusting in growth, whether it’s actually experiencing it or not.” Jared Wilson

“I spent most of my early years seeking my own glory. Popularity, music, and academic excellence were my idols of choice, and I spent most of my teenage years pursuing them. ...I was striving to gain the approval of those whose approval was of no eternal significance. I’d failed to see that the only approval that matters – God’s – is impossible to earn but is offered as a gift through the gospel. And it was the gospel that set me free. I knew Jesus died on the cross to save sinners from God’s wrath, enduring in our place the punishment we deserved. I understood that I couldn’t save myself. I just

didn't think of myself as a very great sinner. Which meant I didn't need a very great Savior. When I sought glory for myself, praise for my accomplishments, and credit for my growth, I wasn't depending on a Savior – I was searching for an audience. God used various people and means to transform my heart. ...Today the gospel – which I so frequently assumed but so often failed to apply – is the center and foundation of my daily life. I continue to learn about the pervasive power of sin and the greater power of Jesus Christ to redeem me from it. I love Jesus more than I ever thought I would or could. Why have I shared all this? Because I want to make it clear from the start that worship isn't primarily about music, techniques, liturgies, songs, or methodologies. It's about our hearts. It's about what and who we love more than anything. Here's my sobering discovery. I learned that I could lead others in worshiping God and be worshiping something else in my own heart. But by the grace of God, I was beginning to understand what worship is all about." Bob Kauflin

"In your ministry you can faithfully call people to submit their lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and in that very same ministry surrender your heart to a whole catalog of pastoral idolatries. When this happens, you do ministry in the hopes of getting horizontally what you have already been given vertically. In ways in which you are unaware, you are asking ministry acclaim, success, reputation, etc. to be your own personal messiah. This will never work. It always leads to bad choices and never results in the inner security that you seek." Paul David Tripp

"Pastor, there is no congregation you need to preach to more than yourself. There is no more important place to exegete and expound grace than in your own heart. There is no more important place to teach what it means to apply that grace to the concrete situations, locations, and relationships than in your own life. There is no more important place to fear the harvest of duplicity than in your own heart. There is no place to be more concerned about functional religiously acceptable idolatry than in your own life. Ministry is a war for the gospel in your own heart. Grace enables you to be a good soldier. You and I cannot and must not allow ourselves to become comfortable with things that God says are wrong. You and I must not learn to make things work that simply aren't working. You and I must not work to convince ourselves that our idols aren't really idols. You and I cannot permit ourselves to live a ministry life that lacks consistency and integrity. You and I must understand that we have been called to battle for the gospel of Jesus Christ and that war begins in our hearts." Paul David Tripp

"In his book When People Are Big and God is Small, Ed Welch points out that the love for the glory that comes from man comes down ultimately to 'needing something from other people.' We need their approval, their love, their affirmation, and their attention to save us from our sense of insignificance and bestow value upon us. Receiving it becomes an idol. When we need others in this way, the result is bondage; our life is lived under the control of other people and their opinions of us. The idol of the glory that comes from man can own us like no other idol. It can tell us how to think, what to feel, how to act, what to wear, and when to laugh." J.R. Vassar

"The trivial gods of our own making do not fill us with reverence. How could they? They remain under our control, subject to our desires, and thus they inspire a good deal of misdirected devotion from a culture in the thrall of scientific methodology, with its

zealous dedication to control and explanation. The result has been a notable loss of awe; bullying empiricism has mugged mystery and left it lying with barely a pulse. To the extent that 'mystery' means anything at all today, it likely brings to mind a detective novel or a thriller movie. Longing for transcendence, however, cannot be repressed. Hunger for worship and the joy it brings remains buried deep within the human heart. And so these impulses occasionally get loose like wild horses breaking out of a corral: in addition to established religions and our own trivial gods, trendy spiritualities come and go, rising and falling with celebrity endorsements and cultic tragedies. These yearnings simply intimate we were made for something more, for Someone more, for an Other who exists wholly outside us and 'above' us. When this One seizes our attention through Jesus Christ, we may very well respond in joyous praise. But as this worship opens us to the presence of God, we find ourselves filled with fear. At least, we ought to be filled with fear. For if God is holy, our efforts to be like God are undone; if God is holy, our trivial gods are revealed as worth precisely nothing; if God is holy, the ground has been yanked out from under our feet and we are left hanging in the thin air of absolute vulnerability. 'The fear of the Lord,' we are told, 'is the beginning of knowledge' (Proverbs 1:7)." Donald McCullough

PEOPLE PLEASING PASTORS

The following quotes are from the book People Pleasing Pastors: Avoiding the Pitfalls of Approval-Motivated Leadership, by Charles Stone (InterVarsity, 2014).

“If People-Pleasing Pastors Anonymous existed, I’d probably be a card-carrying member. I’m still in recovery. In retrospect, as I think about my thirty-plus years in ministry as a senior pastor, church planter, teaching pastor and associate pastor – half of that time in churches with more than a thousand attendees – I can now see the impact of people pleasing. Not only have I felt its affects, but my family and the churches where I served have as well. By most standards, my ministries have been successful. The churches I served grew numerically, and the people grew spiritually. We served the community and we served the world. On the whole, the people felt that I served them well. And I believe we honored the Lord. Yet I wonder how the decisions I made that were motivated by a desire to please somebody in the church resulted in missing God’s best. I wonder how many more people could have moved closer to Jesus had I not allowed desire for approval to influence my leadership and my decisions.”

“Not all people pleasing is misguided or unhealthy. Pleasing God and healthy people pleasing are not mutually exclusive. In 1 Corinthians 9, the apostle Paul talks about his freedom as a minister of the gospel. God gives pastors certain rights: being treated with respect and enjoying the spiritual fruits of their labor (both spiritual and material). Yet certain responsibilities counterbalance those rights: preaching willingly, serving others and not being a slave to anyone. Paul captures this tension in this verse. ‘Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.’ (1 Cor 9:19-23) In other words, Paul committed himself to pleasing others (‘to the weak I become weak’) if it promoted the gospel. Yet he refused to please people if he perceived doing so would hinder the gospel (see Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4). So, the ultimate test to determine whether or not our people pleasing is wrong is whether or not it promotes the gospel.”

“Leaders who lead according to principle practice adaptive change, which is deep, long-lasting, healthy change. They courageously and thoughtfully act out of their principles, not to placate feelings but to do what is best for the church.”

“A pastor with high emotional maturity (a strong leadership immune system) can experience healthier relationships with leaders, staff and church people. Why? Because he chooses to allow wise, biblical thinking to guide how he relates rather than letting his emotions dictate. He has rooted his self-worth in his relationship with Christ and in his values, not in tension-free relationships, good circumstances, approval from others or a

growing church. He keeps his focus even when things aren't going well. He is able to say 'I' in the face of others who try to coerce him to say 'we.' He can stay the course when reactive people want to reroute him. The more separate and individual he is as a leader, while at the same time staying connected to others, the more clearly he can define reality and lead others in it. He is more often fully present with others, yet still maintains his individuality."

"A pastor with a strong spiritual and emotional core (strong leadership immune system) is like that large, solid seed in the avocado. He certainly must have a soft side, but at his center he is solid, in the good sense of the word, rather than unyielding. However, a pastor with low differentiation of self, a people pleaser, has a much smaller inner core and a much larger squishy part. He easily morphs and adapts to the pressures around him and loses part of himself when he tries to please others."

"When I use people-pleasing, approval-motivated concepts to describe a leader, I'm not implying that he or she won't move their ministry forward if they are a pleaser. However, such leadership will clearly limit forward motion, just as a tire drag slows a runner. So if you want to position yourself for maximum kingdom impact, begin to untie the 'people-pleasing drag' from your leadership."

"Conquering and avoiding people pleasing does not mean we become self-absorbed, selfish, self-centered or insensitive to others. God's call to service means that we often should put others first. In that sense we should please them. But serving must never degenerate into servility. Also, the Bible instructs every follower of Jesus to be filled with his Spirit and to live out the fruit of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Gal. 5:22-23). Living that way will please many. So leaders must appropriately please others and avoid the unhealthy kinds of pleasing. "One of the biggest shocks from my research was the large number of anonymous stories pastors shared about their experience with people pleasing: I collected *one hundred pages* of stories. These stories came from pastors across North and South America from small and large churches."

"The lower a pastor's emotional maturity, the more he will live in and be led by his emotional world. He will wrap his goals around comfort, security, happiness and feelings of love. Because he hungers for those pleasurable experiences, he invests his energies to gain others' approval through people pleasing."

"I erroneously assumed that if I obeyed God's will with a pure heart, people would like me and my ideas, and they would readily follow my leadership. What a surprise awaited me when I entered ministry."

A MINI CONCORDANCE ON THE FEAR OF GOD

IT IS INSPIRED BY THE PRESENCE OF GOD ALMIGHTY

Exod 3:1-6; Acts 7:32
 1Chron 16:23-36
 Job 23:13-17; 31:21-23
 Psa 89:5-11; 96:4-6; 119:113-120
 Isa 6:1-7; 8:11-17
 Jer 5:22
 Dan 6:25-27
 Luke 9:28-36
 Acts 5:11
 Rev 1:9-18; 14:6-7; 15:1-4

IT IS LACKING IN UNBELIEVERS

Psa 36:1-4; 55:19
 Prov 1:22-33
 Eccl 8:11-13
 Mal 3:5
 Rom 3:9-20

IT IS PRESENT IN BELIEVERS

Psa 22:25; 25:14; 34:9; 147:11
 Acts 9:31; 10:35
 2Cor 5:11
 Philip 2:12-13
 1Pet 1:17-19; 2:16-17
 Rev 19:5

IT RESTRAINS SIN

Exod 18:21; 20:20
 Lev 19:14
 2Chron 19:7
 Prov 3:7; 8:13; 16:6

IT IS ASSOCIATED WITH POSITIVE BLESSINGS

Love - Deut 5:29; 6:2,13,24; 10:12; Psa 118:4
 Joy – Psa 2:11; Mt 28:8
 Praise – Psa 135:20; Rev 19:5
 Delight – Isa 11:3
 Compassion – Psa 103:13
 Salvation – Exod 20:2,20; Psa 85:9

Forgiveness – Psa 130

Peace – Acts 9:31

Zeal – Prov 23:17

Hope - Psa 33:18

Security – Prov 14:26

Trust - Exod 14:31; Psa 40:3; 115:11

Gratitude – Jer 5:24

Worship – Rev 14:7; 15:3-4

WISDOM ABOUT THE FEAR OF GOD

“Two short sentences sum up the whole – *Fear God, and keep his commandments*. The sentences are in the right order. *The fear of God* is the hidden principle of obedience....It is not a legal principle of terror or bondage, but the genuine spirit of confidence – the delicate expression of filial love in the heart of the child of God – the holy fruit of forgiveness. Here we walk with our Father, humbly, acceptably, securely – looking not at an offended God with terror – but at a reconciled God with reverential love. All the gracious influences on the soul – cherished under the power of the Spirit – all flow out in godly *fear* towards him”. Charles Bridges

“If ever people were starving for a God the size of God, surely it is now. Give them a God who is holy, independent, and unlike us, a God who is good, just, full of wrath, and full of mercy. Give them a God who is sovereign, powerful, tender and true. Give them a God with edges. Give them an undiluted God who makes them feel cherished and safe, and small and uncomfortable too. Give them a God who works all things after the counsel of his will and for the glory of his name. Give them a God whose love is lavish and free. Give them a God worthy of wonder and fear, a God big enough for all our faith, hope, and love. Do your friends, your church, your family, your children know that God is the center of the universe? Can they see that he is at the center of your life?” Kevin DeYoung

“Trust in the saving power of the Deity does not do away with the fear of God. On the contrary, the acceptance of salvation produces a kind of awe which is only compatible with the humility, the brokenness, the utter contrition of the saved. This fear is not the result of God’s destroying wrath or condemning judgment. It arises from the perception of his very love, unmerited, gratuitous, unearned.” S. Terrien

“This fear comes from accomplished grace. The condemned man who is pardoned is seized by fear at the power which has caused death to retreat.” Jacques Ellul

“Get them in sight of Calvary. Pause there...hushed and reverent; enable them to look, to see it, make it real to them, not just an old tale that has lost its wonder and its stab, but a tremendous, awful fact.” A. J. Gossip

“Lord Jesus, I’m afraid.
I confess my imagination’s
Illegitimate fear.
Replace this tiger-terror
With Your love.
Destroy fear’s rage
Before it inflicts devastating wounds.
Fill my mind with Your truth,
That I may revere You
And confess my fear
With wisdom and courage.”
Maryann Cavender Hood

“Why lies He in such mean estate,
 Where ox and ass are feeding?
 Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
 The silent Word is pleading”
 William C. Dix

“My God, how wonderful Thou art,
 Thy majesty how bright!
 How beautiful Thy mercy-seat,
 In depths of burning light!

How dread are Thine eternal years,
 O everlasting Lord,
 By prostrate spirits day and night
 Incessantly adored!

How wonderful, how beautiful,
 The sight of Thee must be,
 Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,
 And awful purity!

O how I fear Thee, living God,
 With deepest, tenderest fears,
 And worship Thee with trembling hope
 And penitential tears!

Yet I may love Thee, too, O Lord,
 Almighty as Thou art;
 For Thou hast stooped to ask of me
 The love of my poor heart.

No earthly father loves like Thee;
 No mother, e'er so mild,
 Bears and forbears as Thou hast done
 With me, Thy sinful child.

Father of Jesus, love's reward,
 What rapture will it be
 Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
 And ever gaze on Thee!”
 Frederick William Faber

“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
 And grace my fears relieved;
 How precious did that grace appear
 The hour I first believed.”
 John Newton