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Chapter One

GRIPPED by the HOLINESS *of* GOD

Isaiah 6:1–7

I AM DEEPLY CONVICTED in my heart that this is one of the most important studies you have ever undertaken. Isaiah has a message about God that, if we let it take us and shake us, we will never be the same. A joy-producing, fulfillment-enhancing, life-exhilarating change. The kind of change you would expect when you are gripped by the Creator and Designer of your own soul.

Ready—here we go.

Every journey begins with the first step. This first step in climbing God's great mountain means we walk in Isaiah's footsteps and see what Isaiah saw—the immense, indescribable, incomprehensible holiness of God. Maybe you're thinking, *Whoa, can't we start with His love or mercy or something more friendly, and then sort of work our way up to holiness?* The answer is no. We don't get to choose where we start—God is in charge of that. So we'll start where God started with Isaiah—with His holiness.

Holiness. What image does that conjure up in your mind? My

earliest image of holiness is standing in a little country Baptist church. I was maybe five years old, staring straight ahead with my brothers, all stiff and stale, my suit and tie choking the life out of me. In the same row were my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, all gripping the pew in front of them till their knuckles turned white. They sang at the top of their lungs, a medieval organ backing their trio . . .

*“Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God Almighty!*

Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.”¹

For me, God’s holiness was connected with the clock ever so slowly ticking out the remaining minutes of the monotonous message while I squirmed on the hard seat searching for relief from the heat and longing to be free from constraint. Do you relate in some way to that picture?

Possibly you think of holiness as a list of rules to freeze freedom and crush your creativity. Maybe you have known some people who claimed to be fired up about holiness, but there’s nothing appealing about their lifestyle or perspective on living a God-centered life. They live by black-and-white thinking that says, “This is holy, and that is not.” Rule lovers—they delight to point out who is not making the grade on their latest checklist of absolute rules for holiness.

That’s not God’s kind of holiness.

God does not present His holiness as a horizontal prescription for human activity. God displays holiness as the central and defining essence of His character. I know some people think that God is defined by love, but I would beg to differ. If love was at the very center of God’s nature, then He could have welcomed us into heaven without the atoning death of His Son, Jesus. Fact is, God’s holiness demanded that sin be paid for, and then His love compelled Him to pay the price Himself.

To know God as He truly is requires dispelling our human notions of holiness and thinking about it in a fresh, new way. Let’s start there—with a lofty view of exalted holiness from the God who said, **“Be holy, for I am holy.”** When we allow ourselves to be gripped by that reality, no human standard of goodness, no man-made regulation of righ-

teousness, no plastic, legalistic creed will ever again substitute for such a fearful and wonderful encounter.

So let's bag what man says about God's holiness and let the ever-new message of God's Word shape our ideas about Him. The Bible has the power to change our lives by introducing us to a God whom our culture, even our Christian culture, has ignored, softened, and minimized. A true glimpse of God in all His holiness will rock your world to the core. I want that; don't you?

If your answer is yes, then stand with me at the base of God's holy mountain. Warning: There's no way we can scale the heights of holiness in this brief study or even in our short lifetime. After reading the next few pages, we won't say, "Oh, I get it. What's next?" But through the eyes and words of the prophet Isaiah, we can step a little closer. In humble dependence, we can ask God to reveal to us more of His holiness, and I'm confident He will.

GRIPPED BY THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Just to remind you, our man Isaiah flashed like a shooting star over the dark sky of a morally corrupt culture. His specific, God-given call was to minister to the affluent leaders of his day. Isaiah knew what it was like to move among self-sufficient people. They had power, money, and influence—what more did they need? Sound familiar?

I talk to people all the time who have deceived themselves into thinking that they've got life hardwired. They have a good education, a good job, and a good portfolio. Their life is moving along at a pretty good pace, so they think they don't need God.

If I could, I would take these loved ones by the shoulders and shake them . . . hard. I would say, "Do you realize what you are saying?" But since it's not proper for a pastor to do that sort of thing, I'll settle for saying loud and clear, "Wake up, dude! It's not about who *you* are. It's all about who *God* is." That's what Isaiah figured during the event recorded in Isaiah 6:1–7. (Now's a good time to go back and read the passage on the first page of this chapter if you did not do so earlier.)

God allowed Isaiah to peek into His heavenly throne room and glimpse His holiness like no human being has ever done! And he was

seriously laid out, or we would say “gripped,” by what he saw. Isaiah’s vision of this scene above the ceiling is one we desperately, desperately need in the church today. Why? Because it blows away the comfortable, manageable God we’ve fashioned for ourselves. It reminds us how small we are and how great He is. So great, in fact, that He is unapproachable except in the ways He has prescribed.

Did you ever learn about the children of Israel’s desert wanderings? The people and priests understood God’s innate holiness far better than we ever have. When God instructed them to build the

tabernacle, He included a place for Himself called the Holy of Holies that was so sacred, so ominous that only *one* person *once* a year could enter, and *only* with an offering. The place was filled with such mystery that every year, before that one priest entered, they would tie a rope of bells around his ankle, just in case he did something wrong and was struck dead on the spot.

God is holy,
and to see His
holiness means
to do it His way.

Then the other guys could pull him out of the Holy of Holies without meeting the same end. The priests of old had a mega, reverential awe of God and His holiness.

Back then nobody confused the creature with the Creator. God is set apart way above any human standard. Set apart for a special purpose. There was no one like God. That’s why this vision Isaiah had of entering God’s throne room is so cool. And God invites us, through Isaiah’s eyes, into a place very few people have ever been. How many times have we said we want to know God? Well, here’s our chance. Let’s explore Isaiah’s vision one piece at a time.

In the year of King Uzziah’s death (v. 1)

The date 740 B.C. may not mean much to you and me, but to Isaiah’s original readers, the date marked the end of an era. King Uzziah had been a fixture in Israel, ruling the nation for fifty-two years. For the most part, they had been good, peaceable years. So, when leprosy finally took his life and his long reign ended, the country was thrown into incredible turmoil. Imagine what it would be like if we had a president for fifty-two years and felt secure and accustomed to his ways. Everything is operating like clockwork—then suddenly

every television channel interrupts programming with the stunning news from Washington that the president is dead.

When Uzziah died, the nation's moral climate went into a tailspin. People began to think, "If I'm going to make it in this crazy culture, it'll be on my own, doing what I think is right for a change."

In the midst of this moral confusion, God called Isaiah to speak for Him.

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord (*emphasis added*)

Think of the significance of those four words. **"I saw the Lord."** Who could ever be the same? Now, whether he was waking or sleeping, whether he had a vision or a dream, we're not told. But Isaiah was supernaturally allowed to see the very throne room of God.

Notice the word "Lord." When it's *LORD* (all caps), it refers to God's covenant name, Yahweh. But here *Lord* is lowercase, referring not to God's name, but to His position. Isaiah is really saying, "I saw the ultimate Monarch! I saw the Sovereign! The Ruler over everything! I saw Him!"

John 12:41 indicates that Isaiah actually saw the pre-incarnate Christ, the second person of the Trinity. It couldn't have been God the Father, as is commonly thought, since John 1:18 says, **"No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him"** (NKJV). So, Isaiah was allowed to see Christ before His incarnation. Before Jerusalem, before Nazareth, before Bethlehem, Isaiah was given one quick glimpse of Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, in all of His glory . . . and it took his breath away.

. . . sitting on a throne

Notice what Isaiah saw in the next phrase. **"I saw the Lord sitting on a throne."** Sitting—not pacing back and forth. Sitting—not wringing His hands. Sitting—not struggling or searching. Not God. Where was He? He was seated. He was settled. He was secure. He was certain.

I wrote in the margin of my Bible, "Why so settled and so seated?" The answer is: because He is in control. He knows it. Everyone in the throne room knows it. No one is worried.

I am struck by that truth each time we sing a particular worship song at Harvest Bible Chapel. The lyrics include the phrase, "You are

in control.” When I sing it, I think of this verse in Isaiah. God is seated on the throne. He is in control. Wow, that sure puts into perspective any burden I carry on my heart. How difficult could this problem be for God, no matter how monstrous it might seem to me? What problem would seem large to the One who is *sitting* on a throne? My problems are nothing to Him. He is in control! Even of this? (Think about your biggest worry right now.) Yup. He’s even controlling that. Even *this*? (Think about the biggest issue facing our world today.) Even *that*. The Lord is *sitting* on His throne.

... lofty and exalted

Notice the Lord isn’t just sitting on any old throne. “**I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted.**” I believe that the main reason the church has lost its moral vision is because it has lost its high and exalted view of God. We have embraced the comfort of His nearness at the expense of His transcendence. God is not the “man upstairs.” God is not an old codger with a white beard. God is ineffable glory, and He dwells in unapproachable light. The Bible says that no one can see God and live. He is lofty and exalted.

... with the train of His robe filling the temple.

The train is the part of the robe that communicates honor. Seldom seen today except at formal weddings, the train is the symbol of grandeur and royalty. If you’ve ever seen a video clip of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth many years ago at Westminster Abbey, you would remember that the train of her robe went all the way down the aisle and almost to the back door of that cathedral. It took several courtiers to carry the train of her robe during her coronation.

What does Isaiah say about the robe of almighty God? He says it fills the temple! Down the aisle and back again, back to front, front to back, doubling and redoubling. The symbol of God’s splendor fills the temple. So awesome is this view of God that Isaiah can look no higher than the train of His robe. Isaiah cannot elevate his eyes beyond the hem of our Lord’s garment.

Just imagine, if the *hem* of our God’s robe *fills* the temple, think of His presence! Isaiah, so overcome by the sight of this holy God, can only describe the fringe of His clothing. Isaiah is so completely

awestruck that he has to look away and says in effect with his next phrase, “Let me tell you about the angels.”

Seraphim stood above Him (v. 2)

The seraphim are the angels that exist in the throne room who instantaneously do the bidding of almighty God—ever standing to serve the seated Sovereign. The Hebrew word *seraph* literally means “the burning ones.” Though we have more questions than we can answer about the seraphim, we are given a limited physical description of them and their role. Picture two lines of angels coming out from the throne of God, **“each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew”** (v. 2).

Why six wings? Two cover their faces lest they see the glory of God and die. Always serving but never able to look upon the Holy One. Two wings cover their feet which symbolize their lowliness—lest God see them and the shame they feel in the presence of infinite holiness. And with two more wings they flew. It’s interesting that four of their six wings are for relating to God; only two are for serving Him.

The verbs *covered* and *flew* are continuous action. The angels’ motion is ceaseless as they fulfill with precision every wish of almighty God. And they don’t just fly; they speak as they hover around God’s throne.

And one called out to another . . . “Holy, Holy, Holy” (v. 3)

You got that picture in your mind’s eye of the seraphim forming two lines coming out from God’s throne? Now, listen as they call out back and forth, from one line to the other in an antiphonal chorus that through ages of time has gone on without interruption. And what do they say? Imagine all the things they could say about God. They could say, “Merciful, Merciful, Merciful God!” They could say, “Loving, Loving, Loving God!” But God, in a mystery we could guess at but never comprehend, chose that the words spoken continuously before His throne would be of His holiness.

So these burning ones call back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, never ceasing: **“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.”**

And this *never* stops. This praise never ceases. It goes on and on and on through countless eons of time. This brings to mind a well-known

Bible teacher who recently visited our church and ridiculed modern worship as a collection of repetitious diddies. How strange that such a good man would not be fond of something God not only appreciates but has ordained, namely the endless, changeless chorusing of a single line of certainty. When the truth is significant, there is great power in repetition, especially if the subject is an attribute of God.

Actually, in the Hebrew language when someone writing or speaking wants to emphasize something, he or she will repeat the word. For example, if they wanted to tell you that they fell into a pit, they would say “pit.” But if it was a really deep pit, they would say that they fell into a “pit” pit. While several times in the original language of Scripture we can read a repeated word for emphasis (for example, *shalom*, the Hebrew word for peace used in Isaiah 26:3, is literally “peace, peace,” meaning peace now and peace for eternity), nowhere in all of Scripture do we see an attribute repeated *three* times. This three-peat is used only of God and only of this attribute. The seraphim are saying that God is not *just* holy, and not *just* “holy, holy,” but that the Lord of hosts is “*holy, holy, holy*”! The whole earth is full of His glory! Think of that chorus as it goes on endlessly and eternally. In fact, it’s going on at this very moment. Isaiah stood there stunned and silent as he gazed upon the transforming scene and trembled in the presence of God.

And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out (v. 4)

Isaiah, no doubt prostrate by now, was not aware that the whole temple was shaking. It seems he thought just the doorway was shaking as if to say, “This far! No farther! You can go no closer to the holy presence of almighty God.”

. . . while the temple was filling with smoke.

Consider the scene. The angels’ antiphonal hymn was thunderous. The temple foundation was shaking. Then comes the smoke rising quickly to veil Isaiah’s sight. Why smoke? I believe that it was God’s protection of Isaiah, lest he be consumed in another moment by the utter terror, by the majestic purity and power, the unsearchable, unspeakable, infinite holiness of the triune God. The smoke graciously shielded Isaiah from a view that no man or woman can see and live (Exodus 33:20).

GET A GRIP ON GOD'S GREATNESS

God's Holiness—Your Model

Isaiah's favorite name for God is "The Holy One of Israel"—the *Qādash*. By calling Him the *Qādash*, he describes God's character in two seemingly opposite ways:

1. God's holiness evokes awe. He is frightening beyond belief and filled with superhuman and potentially fatal power.
2. God is set apart from all others and evokes our adoration and reverence. It is in this way that we as believers are called to be holy. We are called "saints"—literally the set apart ones.

The apostle Peter tells us to be like God—the Holy One—set apart in everything we do (1 Peter 1:15). He says, Be totally sold out to God! Be available for His special use! Refuse to be entwined in sin. Jesus prayed for you in this same way (John 17:17). He asked His Father to protect you and to sanctify you (set you apart)—so that you would be living pure and ready to be used by God. Imagine that . . . today, Jesus prays that you would be holy.

Now, friend, when was the last time you heard about the incredible reality of God's holy presence? Have you ever fully considered what it means? Preferring the comforting truths of God's love and mercy, we have lost this awesome vision of His holiness. The result is that our faith is too often anemic and malnourished by the spiritual equivalent of junk food. We talk about Him as if He were our buddy. We wallow in sin, and revel in a grace that is cheapened because it is separated from this penetrating, purifying holiness.

We've missed such a huge piece of what it means to be alive and to be men and women connected to God. We have no identity prob-

lem when we understand ourselves from God's perspective. Our anxieties and pressures dissipate. When we see God as Isaiah did here, we dip our toes in the greatest experience a human being can have—to stand in the presence of a holy God.

I'll say it again, dear friend: We desperately need to be gripped by this view of the highness and the holiness of God. Because we have failed to let it capture our hearts, we so seldom hear what comes next in verse 5.

ISAIAH'S RESPONSE

Isaiah, watching all of this, finally had to say something. His only appropriate response to the impact of being gripped by God's holiness was **"Woe is me, for I am ruined!"** (v. 5). The word *woe* means literally the calamity has fallen or is about to fall. Malachi 3:2 says, **"Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?"** Isaiah was saying in effect, *"That's God? That's who He is? I am dust!"*

When we
experience God
for who He
really is, we
suddenly see
ourselves for
who we are.

The same is true today. You cannot gaze upon the holiness of God without being overcome. Even as I've studied this passage over the past several days, I've been deeply impacted. I've thought and studied and reflected on God's holiness, and I've felt wounded by my own sinfulness. How could a person *not* be overcome when confronted with such a holy God? Isaiah was saying in effect, *"That's the standard? That's how high the bar is set? If that's true, then I am finished! I am broken! Woe is me!"*

David said, **"If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, . . . who could stand?"** (Psalm 130:3). If God were to mark and record every sin that we have committed, who could bear up under that kind of scrutiny? So Isaiah says, **"Woe is me, for I am ruined!"** Isaiah shouted in effect, *"I'm dead. I'm done for. I am silenced."*

I have to shake my head in grief when I hear people spout, *"I don't know what God's doing in this ol' world, but if I ever get a chance, I'm*

gonna straighten Him out on a few things.” And I want to respond, “*What?! What did you say? Listen up! No one can see God and live!*”

If ever for a moment we should get to peek under the corner of the curtain, we would be on our faces before God. Isaiah says, “**Woe is me . . . because I am a man of unclean lips.**”

“How can I open my mouth and speak for this God? What could I say about Him?” Isaiah asks. “I am a man of unclean lips. And do you know something else? I dwell amongst a people of unclean lips.” We’re all so truly sinful before this Holy God—all of us!

God forgive us for thinking, “You know, Lord, I think I’m a bit more holy than some of Your other followers.” What a joke! Who cares about how you compare to the other guy? Who can stand before this God? May God forgive us for seeing this chapter title and thinking, “Holiness, oh yeah, maybe there’s a couple of things I could dig out and upgrade, but I don’t know what they are. I know I’m not perfect, but the fact is I’ve known the Lord for a long time, and I’ve come pretty far in—” *In what!?* Who could gaze upon this God and not be overcome with a sense of their incredible, desperate need for a fresh infusion of who He is?

May God help us be a people that will embrace not only the messages about Him that delight our hearts, but also the ones that grip us and shake us to the core of our souls. We’ll have to deal with these truths about God for all of eternity; better to start the reality check now, don’t you think?

“My eyes have seen the King.”

Isaiah said, “**I’m ruined. I’m filthy. I live with unclean people.**” Why, Isaiah? Why do you feel so overcome? Because, the prophet writes, “My eyes have seen the King.” The king of what? “*The King!*” It’s like he said, “My eyes—for a moment before the temple filled with smoke—my eyes saw the *King!*”

Isaiah grieved, “I saw the King, and I knew I was unclean.”

What he discovered at a deeper level we all must continually review. We are all immensely unclean before the holiness and righteousness of almighty God. In the purity of God’s holiness, our sinfulness is exposed for public inspection.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me. (v. 6)

Praise the Lord for the word *then*. How tragic would it be if I ended this chapter right now and said, “That’s the holiness of God—now go deal with it.” Instead, one of the seraphim flew to Isaiah **“with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched [Isaiah’s] mouth with it and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin forgiven’”** (vv. 6–7).

There’s an incredible lesson here. We are only prepared to receive and comprehend the grace of God when we have understood His infinite holiness and our incredible sinfulness. Any presentation of the gospel which leaves that truth out is incomplete. It’s the holiness of God that casts us upon His mercy.

Just in case you missed that last thought, let me repeat it. We are only prepared to receive and comprehend the grace of God when we have understood His infinite holiness and our incredible sinfulness.

Try to remember that the next time you are tempted to gloss over a sin in your life. “Well, it’s not that bad.” Or “everyone understands.” Refuse that trashy kind of rationalization. It belongs in the gutter, for sure. Let’s never forget Isaiah’s throne-room vision of the holiness of God. Allow God to grip your heart with this truth and you’ll find you have no more patience for your own lame excuses!

Make a mental note of this: God calls us to holiness. That’s why that seraph went to the altar and got a coal to cleanse Isaiah. God wants us to be holy. How incredible is that? “*Be holy, for I am holy,*” God says. “What? Like You? How could that be possible?” Isaiah, overcome with his own sinfulness, begins to experience the grace and mercy that flows from this holy throne.

Let me ask you this: Why did that seraph get the coal? Was it because he felt sorry for Isaiah? Was it because he decided, “Poor Isaiah, he seems to be a little beat. Let’s help him”? I would suggest to you that the angel went and got the symbol of cleansing by the direct command of almighty God Himself. I doubt that there is a whole lot of personal autonomy among the angels around God’s throne. I’m suggesting they do *exactly* what God wants them to do. Though it’s not stated, here we see a God who is infinitely holy yet sees Isaiah, no doubt on his face before Him, and directs the seraph, “Go get a coal off the

altar.” And the angel goes and gets the coal and brings it to Isaiah for cleansing. That’s a picture of our loving, forgiving, merciful God.

On earth, the altar was a place of continual burning, where animals were offered as sacrifice for sin. We can only guess that the altar in heaven parallels that atoning place. Because of His holiness, God will not simply *declare* us righteous in some random act. He will not dismiss our sin without a substitute. It was on that altar where the substitute for sin was made.

He touched my mouth with it.

The angel comes with the coal and *psssssst*. Purged. Maybe you have felt as you read this chapter that you cannot possibly relate to this holy God. Perhaps there are some things you have done in your life that few, if any, people know about. You feel so ashamed, unclean, and unworthy. But wait—aren’t you amazed to discover that in the fullest and most awe-producing vision in all of Scripture regarding God’s holiness there is this additional picture of His forgiveness?

Think of it. God Himself sent for the instrument of Isaiah’s cleansing and forgiveness. Isaiah was washed clean, cleaner than any launderer can whiten (Mark 9:3). Cleansed, not only of the small and silly but also of the serious and shameful. Wholly cleansed by our holy God.

Now we are at the critical moment. I remember the first time I truly understood that God’s holiness was entirely unattainable. That no matter how hard I tried I could never live up to this infinite standard. I learned that because of my sins I was not only ineligible for God’s forgiveness but fully deserving His punishment. I was told that two thousand years ago Jesus Christ, God’s Son, accepted the punishment for my sin and died in my place. I saw that Jesus gave His life so His holy Father could release me from the just penalty for my sin and grant to me full and complete forgiveness.

Have you come to that understanding? To be truly forgiven, all you must do is turn from your sin and come to Christ by faith. If you have never made that decision, I urge you to do so now. All that God longs to do in your life begins in that moment of conversion (Matthew 18:3). It’s a crisis every person must come to, and it doesn’t happen by accident. You can’t be converted without knowing it any more than

you can be married without knowing it. To be converted requires turning from sin and coming to God in faith that Jesus died for you.

What Isaiah experienced from the altar in that moment was symbolic of the sacrifice of Jesus once for all (1 Peter 3:18). And it can be yours in this moment if you embrace by faith the forgiveness God freely offers in Christ (Romans 6:23).

CONVERTED FOR HOLINESS

Contrary to popular opinion, God does not offer to forgive us simply so we can come to a crisis of conversion and receive the eternal benefits of His forgiveness. God cleanses us because He wants to transform us, to make us holy just as He is.

For a moment, let's fly over to a New Testament passage that completes this truth. First Peter 1:14–19 says,

As obedient children . . . like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" . . . knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with the precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

So this infinitely holy, immeasurable, unalterable, unfathomable God says, "I've cleansed you for holiness." Think of that. "I want you to be like Me—holy. I've done what you could not do so you would have this incredible opportunity to be holy—now go for it."

Wow! "Be holy, for I am holy." That's a high call. I cannot attain unto it. I feel like this silly little boy standing at the base of Mount Everest considering a climb. "Be holy, for I am holy." You've got to be kidding; how could I ever . . . ?

It Happened to Me

SABBATICAL REVIVAL

Yes, a personal encounter with the holiness of God did happen to me and has many times over. The real turning point, however, came on a beach on the south coast of France.

The year was 1998, and I was thirty-eight years old. Ten years had been logged as a senior pastor. Our elder board, sensing my complete exhaustion, had graciously allowed us a three-month sabbatical. I got as far away from the pressures of ministry as I could.

In that place of rest and restoration, I could finally bring God the questions that were plaguing my mind. Why are people who claim to love You so harsh and unforgiving? Is it right that people so aggressively and ungratefully harvest the benefits of a person's strengths and then so vocally lament their weaknesses too? "Man, why don't they get a mirror and take a look at their own lives?"

Of course, this hurt was coming from just a few people; by far the majority of people I was working and worshiping with were wonderful in every way. But those few . . . made me sick of the "heat." And that summer, I wanted "out of the kitchen." If I did go back, it would be to something very different.

Inside, I was weary and wondering how I could go on with such fear in my heart. Yes, I was scared, so much so that I hadn't even told my wife the depth of my disillusionment. But I had sure told the Lord. I came to Him with all my despair. I was looking for comfort, but instead I found conviction . . . about the sin of people pleasing. I was searching for hope, and God showed me His holiness. First slowly, and then with strength and supernatural force, God gripped my heart with His holiness.

Early one morning I was walking on the beach, listening to Scripture, and pouring out my heart to God. God's Spirit began to speak to my spirit in a way that wouldn't be any clearer if it were audible. His questions began to displace my own perplexities. "Why are you so focused on others? Am I not the One you have chosen to serve?" Jesus' words to Peter in John 21 came with force, "**What is that to you? You follow Me!**" (v. 22). And the Lord said to me, "Yes, others are hypocritical, but are you not the same?"

Do you practice all that you preach? Are you so far above others that you cannot give grace as I give it to you? I am the standard! Holiness is My nature, and you're not coming close!"

In a matter of moments I was on my face in the sand behind some rocks and spilling my tears into the ocean. "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up." Not the God of the quick answer and the catchy praise chorus. Infinite, unapproachable holiness. As the waves close by crashed on the shore in the background of my hearing, wave after wave of God's holiness crashed upon my heart. What right do I have to question His calling? I have no choices—only to trust and obey a God who miraculously even takes notice of one like me.

God's holiness became my goal and consuming purpose—not managing human opinion, not keeping a record of wrongs, not juggling private sin and personal rationalizations. All these lessons this preacher should know and did, but I needed to be gripped. I needed God's Spirit to take me and shake me about real holiness. The God-kind, pure and penetrating, powerful and infinite.

*With the waves of realization came a deep heart commitment to give up "trying" to live the Christian life. That moment became a turning point for my whole understanding of how the holy character of God is formed in a believer. (See page 32 in my book *I Really Want to Change . . . So, Help Me God.*)*

I came to see that holiness is character before it is ever conduct. It is the very nature of God reproduced in the heart of man. It is the engine that fuels all lasting happiness.

Christianity is not a prescription for behavior; it is a holy encounter.

Though I've since had my moments where human opinion has encroached, I can say from my heart that I was changed that day. I am stronger and more secure in my true purpose for existence. I am forever changed by the sea of holiness I saw on the south coast of France. It happened to me.

I began this chapter sharing the distorted perception I had of God's holiness as a child. I didn't understand that the process of holiness is the pathway to happiness. I had to learn that God's holiness is not some abstract character trait to be admired like a fine painting or an antique car. What God forbids as sin He does because He knows us. Every time God says "Don't," what He really means is "Don't hurt your-

self.” When we choose to sin, we choose to suffer. All the pain and suffering in our world is the result of humanity rejecting this call to holiness. But you can accept it today. You can embrace the reality of God’s transforming work unto genuine, lasting, joy-producing holiness. God knows this kind of joy infinitely and eternally.

RESPONDING TO GOD’S HOLINESS

Are you gripped by the awesome reality of this truth about God? Will you let the holiness of our awesome God take you and shake you so that you can never see temptation as tempting again? We said we wanted this study of God’s holiness to change us, so let’s start here and now. Begin by rejecting the kind of surface adjustments that substitute for holiness in so many corners of Christ’s kingdom. That may be God’s wake-up call to you. Or perhaps you need to examine if a hyper-grace mentality has eclipsed your vision of an exalted and holy God, who is calling you to live a lifestyle that is truly set apart for Him! As you are forgiven and cleansed, I challenge you to be finished with rationalizations and hypocrisy. They have no place before a holy God! As we invite God to grip our lives with His holiness, let’s respond to Him with a passionate pursuit of genuine Christlikeness. Like Isaiah, let’s purpose to shine like a meteor against the night sky of the moral darkness in our world. And together let’s pursue lives and lifestyles that proclaim with integrity the infinite holiness of our great God.

LET’S PRAY

Holy God,

Please forgive me for my casual attitude about sin. Action sin. Thought sin. Speech sin. Forgive me, God, for hiding my behavior behind Your abundant grace. Help me to embrace from my heart a season of transformation. No more duplicity and hypocrisy. No more playing church and playing Christian. I want the real thing, Lord.

Oh God, I want to see You reigning, not just upon Your throne, but in my heart, in my life, in my home, and in my relationships. Pursue me with a desire to be like You that I cannot outrun. Be

GRIPPED BY THE GREATNESS OF GOD

specific with me, God. I invite You to be high and lifted up, reigning upon the throne of my heart. This I pray in Your name.

—*Amen.*

MAKE IT PERSONAL

- This Sunday as you attend a worship service, imagine the scene Isaiah described—the Lord seated on His throne and in full control. Whatever burden you carried into the service, lay at His feet and direct your focus toward His majestic holiness.
- What's been your take on holiness? Do you tend to be a rule-lover, or does your pendulum swing more toward freedom and not enough behavioral boundaries? Consider what it means to be holy, “set apart” for God in practical ways. Ask God to help you choose your convictions, attitudes, and actions based on His defining holiness.
- Examine your daily habits with a willingness to change anything that doesn't reflect God's holiness in your life. What do you need to lock out of your life—some viewing habits on the web, television, or video? Is it the way you spend your money or maybe the way you respond to those who hurt you? What do you need to limit—what is stealing your hunger for God? What habits do you need to eliminate completely? Holiness calls for radical change.
- Refuse shallow, one-way thinking about God. Live with the tension that God's holiness creates a distance between Him and His people. We are dust in comparison to His glory. His ways are unsearchable, incomprehensible, incomparable, great, wonderful, and exalted. Worship Him for who He is in all His holiness.

Isaiah 40:10–26

The Awesomeness of God

Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.
Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales?
Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?
With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge
And informed Him of the way of understanding?
Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;
Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.
Even Lebanon is not enough to burn,
Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.
To whom then will you liken God?
Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
As for the idol, a craftsman casts it,
A goldsmith plates it with gold,
And a silversmith fashions chains of silver.
He who is too impoverished for such an offering
Selects a tree that does not rot;
He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman
To prepare an idol that will not totter.
Do you not know? Have you not heard?
Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,

Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
He it is who reduces rulers to nothing,
Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
Scarcely have they been planted,
Scarcely have they been sown,
Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither,
And the storm carries them away like stubble.
“To whom then will you liken Me
That I would be his equal?” says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high
And see who has created these stars,
The One who leads forth their host by number,
He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power,
Not one of them is missing.