

**“WOE IS ME.”**

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First Christian Reformed Church  
October 20, 2019, 6:00 PM**

**Text for the Sermon: Isaiah 6:5-7**

**Introduction:**

Isaiah has just seen heaven. Heaven is God, heaven is God in the fullness of His glory, God outshining ten-thousand suns. Heaven is consumed by the all-consuming glory of the one and only creator God. No eye has seen, no ear has heard what He is like in all His glory, splendor and majesty. Remember, Isaiah only saw a glimpse, only a veiled portion because no created being is able to bear seeing all of God’s glory.

How would we respond to the vision of the glory of God? At first Isaiah must have been overwhelmed and intoxicated by the magnificent and majestic display. But then self-consciousness sets in. It’s like gazing in awe at a nighttime sky full of stars and then suddenly feeling very small and insignificant. Or standing in awe before the majestic beauty of the Cascades and then feeling small and inconsequential. Maybe it is a bit like Peter with his eyes fixed on Jesus walking on the water all of a sudden becoming self-aware and beginning to sink in fear.

Isaiah is overwhelmed, he is undone, he is laid low. The staggering chasm between God’s holiness and his unholiness is laid before him.

How many of us in hearing news about a serial killer feel this huge gulf or distance between him and ourselves? We can’t even fathom sinking that low and acting as he did. We see no comparison between him and his sin and us and our sin.

Yet the truth be told, the distance between us and him is an inch and the distance between us and God is a billion miles, light years, no, it is infinite. All that keeps us from being a serial killer is the grace of God, “there but for the grace of God, go I.”

One flashlight might boast to other flashlights of the greatness of its light or the strength of its beam, but what flashlight is there that will boast of its light to the sun?

The gleaming splendor of God’s glory and holiness becomes like a mirror held up before us that shows our own filth, wretchedness, sin and need.

Isaiah is being blown away by two visions. The first vision is breathtaking, the second vision is life threatening. The staggering power of the first vision is evident by its effect on the prophet.

He sees something in himself that terrifies him. What he sees is that if God deals with him according to God's holiness and justice he is destroyed.

### **Woe is me. The vision of the true self.**

Isaiah announces a curse on himself. He calls down wrath and judgment. Woe is me. I am lost. I am doomed to die. Isaiah knew he was as good as dead, because a person cannot see God without dying.

"I am a man of unclean lips. I dwell among a people of unclean lips. And I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Before God he is totally and completely lacking of anything good or righteous or holy. He is fatally flawed.

**Martin Luther** was a man a lot like Isaiah. He was deeply troubled over the state of his soul. He tried every means available to get a clear conscience and to find peace with God. In fact, he became a monk only out of fear and in an attempt to clear his conscience.

"The awful [awareness] of the majesty and holiness of God ... almost crushed him ... He was tormented by the recognition of his own sin, and by the question, 'Have I fasted, watched, prayed, confessed enough?'" (J.I. Packer's Introduction to Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, p. 20).

Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips.

### **Why lips?**

Our lips are connected to the heart.

Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34, ESV). And again, to the Pharisees, "You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me'" (Matthew 15:7-8, ESV).

Our speech more than anything else indicates our character. Our words expose our hearts. At home, at work, at school, at church. What we say implicates us. How do we

talk, what do we say? Do we gossip, speak poorly of others, complain, say cruel or unkind things about our spouses or parents or others?

***What did Isaiah do?*** What can the guilty do? Nothing. Jeremiah asks, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jeremiah 13:23, ESV).

There is nothing he can do, so God gives him a third vision, a vision of the grace of Jesus Christ. Those who are struck down by visions of God’s glory shall be lifted up by visions of His grace. Tears shall turn to joy.

### **The burning coal of God’s grace. The vision of atonement.**

The seraph took a red-hot burning coal from the altar with tongs and with it he touched Isaiah’s lips, that place of uncleanness. “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” He gave him the assurance of pardon; this sign of forgiveness represents the true forgiveness of God.

This is a picture of the Gospel in the OT. This action of the seraph is a picture the redemptive work of Christ on the altar of His sacrifice, on the cross. This action, the burning with the coal, means his guilt is atoned for, covered up, destroyed. God’s wrath is removed.

Scripture tells us God is a consuming fire. Where is your refuge from His consuming fire? The only escape from the consuming fire of God’s wrath is in the consuming fire of God’s love and grace. The wrath and judgment of the cross will destroy us unless we cling to the cross.

At the heart of Reformed faith (and Reformed worship) is the ***liberating conviction*** that it is God who saves sinners. Isaiah contributes nothing to his cleansing, to his atonement, to his redemption. Like Isaiah we are completely unable to contribute anything to our own salvation. We are saved today because God is the God of salvation and He alone has given His salvation to us. “Salvation belongs to the Lord” (Jonah 2:9).

God has done everything. We have done nothing. What do we have that we have not received? So, in what will we boast if everything is gift? I will boast in the cross, the transforming vision of God’s grace.

### **Isaiah’s Three Visions in One.**

***Vision One.*** God is glorified in the revelation of His attributes, His character and nature. God is glorified when we see and acknowledge Him for who He really is.

***Vision Two.*** God is glorified in the contrast between Him and His creation and in the contrast between His holiness and our unholiness. Our humble confession of our sin glorifies Him and His holiness and righteousness.

***Vision Three.*** God is *most* glorified when we receive by faith the grace His Son purchased for us by His death on the cross. What a display of love and grace, of justice and mercy.

J. Gresham Machen said, “It is quite useless to ask a man to adopt the Christian view of the gospel unless he first has the Christian view of sin.” And to that I would add, to have the Christian view of sin, one must begin with the Christian view of the holiness of God.

The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon reflected on this from the story of Jacob and his marriage to Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29.

**Genesis 29:26** Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger [Rachel] before the firstborn [Leah].

“There are some things which must be taken in order, and if we would win the second we must secure the first. The second may be the more lovely in our eyes, but the rule of the heavenly country must stand, and the elder must be married first. For instance, many men desire the beautiful and well-favored Rachel of joy and peace in believing, but they must first be wedded to the tender-eyed Leah of repentance. Every one falls in love with happiness, and many would cheerfully serve twice seven years to enjoy it, but according to the rule of the Lord's kingdom, the Leah of real holiness must be beloved of our soul before the Rachel of true happiness can be attained. ... The cross must be carried before the crown can be worn. We must follow our Lord in His humiliation, or we shall never rest with Him in glory.”

### **Implications and Application.**

***First***, this vision is the beginning of *true humility and of true humanity*. It will make us more human. We cannot be truly human until we know the truth and reality of the holy God who made us. When we have seen God as He is and for who He is, then we come to a true understanding of who we are.

True humanity is humility, humility that acknowledges that we are utterly and absolutely and wholly dependent on God and can make no claims for ourselves. We see our worthlessness and His worthiness.

I am a sinner. I am a man of unclean lips. There is sin in my heart. Among you I am a chief sinner. And I live in a house full of sinners and I am a part of a church family that is full of sinners, every last one of them. And I am a citizen in a nation of sinners. It is in me and all around me.

***Second, humility makes community possible.*** Humility before God and each other creates community and makes community possible. Pride says I don't need you. Pride says I am better than you. Pride says I used to be a sinner, but I am not anymore. Pride says you don't have anything to offer me. My pride says if there is a problem between us, it's you, not me. Pride says there is no log in my eye, but a big one in yours.

King Uzziah's pride was his downfall. He usurped the roles and gifts of others and as a result God inflicted him with leprosy, so he finished out his life isolated from the community of God's people.

True community is where my sin and brokenness are revealed, but also where love and grace are freely shared and experienced.

***Third, this vision is the beginning of true evangelism*** that seeks to help people become real, become truly alive, become aware.

This vision changes the way we tell our story. We don't see it as how great we are, but how great God is. We are free to share our weakness and sin because it magnifies God's glory and grace.

God's best witnesses are those who have drunk deeply from the sweet fountain of His grace, who have felt the powerful influence of His grace to forgive and cleanse and remove their own guilt.

***Fourth, this vision is the beginning of true worship*** to a height that can't be achieved by human means. Our hearts soar with gratitude and praise at the sheer magnitude of what God has done for us, His overwhelming grace.

May we be a people who embrace and live out Isaiah's transforming vision. May we be among those whose sins are forgiven and whose iniquity is pardoned, who are redeemed and reconciled to the Father and to each other. May we be a people who walk humbly with our God and with each other.

Let's humble ourselves before the throne of glory, before the Holy God, the King and Lord of Hosts this week with great thanksgiving.