

# Holiness: Called or Calling?

*By Paul Luckraft*

At the recent Foundations conference in Sidmouth, Devon, we considered the topic of holiness under the general title of Holiness, The Great Disconnect. As the seventh of seven speakers across the four days, I had the daunting task of listening carefully to what God was telling us and provide a summary, or come up something that hadn't already been said! I could hardly complain, having asked to be the final speaker, but thankfully by the end it was clear what God was wanting to say, both about his own holiness and ours.

At the start of the conference I had challenged those attending to undertake a Bible-based exercise: to come up with as many two word phrases they could find in Scripture where the first word was 'holy'. One of the best ways, I argued, to understand this important topic was to see what God had called holy. I started them off with the obvious example, Holy Spirit, and waited to see how our list grew over the remaining days. Why not try this yourself? There are plenty of examples – you may even get as many as fifty.

When considering this list, two main categories seemed to emerge. Some things got their holiness directly from God himself, from his presence. Moses stood on holy ground not because that piece of earth was holier than any other, but because God was there. The same could be said of the holy mountain and the holy city.

Others things were called holy as they were set apart for God, being devoted to him and his service. Such items would include the utensils in the tabernacle and the temple, the holy furnishings and holy articles. But these were *things*. What about the *people* in the list? The holy apostles, prophets, brothers and sisters, the holy nation mentioned in both the Old and New covenants? In other words, what about you and me?

Particularly significant is that we are both *called* holy and also called to *be* holy. 'Be holy as I am holy' occurs six times across Scripture. The Bible also teaches that righteousness is a gift but holiness is a *choice*. This was something to explore further. But first, what about the holiness of God himself?

A good place to start is Isaiah 6, where the prophet recounts his experience of God's throne-room and the angels' thrice-holy declaration of the Lord Almighty. No other description of God uses this threefold formula. Nowhere do

we find 'Love, love, love is the Lord Almighty', or something similar about his mercy or grace.

We meet the same declaration in Revelation 4. God has not changed, nor will he. He is never less than thrice holy – he cannot be otherwise. Moreover, holiness is not really an attribute of God, rather it defines him. It is not a standard to which he conforms, he is that standard. Holiness is generic to who he is, almost a synonym for his deity. The Bible doesn't define holiness; it just points us to God as holy.

We often want to know what God is like. The truth is, he isn't *like* anything or anyone. In fact, he is *unlike*. This is the best way of trying to understand him. In Isaiah 40:25, God asks two rhetorical questions: "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" The response is obvious: God is incomparable, unequalled. To underline the point, the questions are asked by *the Holy One*.

We cannot grasp the true meaning of divine holiness by starting with someone or something of great purity and then say God is like that only more so. God's holiness is not simply the best or greatest example of this. Being holy means that he stand alone: unique, incomprehensible. We think best about God when we accept that he is transcendent, exceeding all limits.

Isaiah's reaction to the holiness of God is most illuminating. His cry of 'woe' seems inadequate. The word 'ruined' or 'undone' does not tell the whole story. He literally feels deconstructed; he experiences an unravelling, a sense of falling apart. Yet this is not the end for Isaiah. It is not his death we are reading about, but his commission. He is torn apart in order to be put together again – floored and then restored.

Our English word 'holiness' ultimately derives from older words which contain a sense of wholeness or health. Holiness is what keeps us healthy in God's terms and wholly in line with him (pun maybe intended!). It is God's holiness that puts us together in the right order. Isaiah's experience was one of disintegration but the intention behind it was to reintegrate him for the purposes of God: not a pleasant experience, but necessary for greater service.

Here is a great mystery. A holy God can fill us with terror one moment yet with peace the next. His holiness attracts us, yet also makes us want to hide. We long to be holy and also can be frustrated by our lack of holiness. We know it is our destiny, yet we have learned to live with unholiness - to look upon it as natural, almost expected, in our lives and the world around us. Instead of

holiness being 'the life desired', we run away as though it is something to be dreaded. We are aware that holiness is important to God, but we can't bring ourselves to make it important to us, all the time knowing that failing to walk in holiness limits our walk with the Lord as his Holy Spirit is grieved or quenched. This is our dilemma, part of the ambiguity of being called holy but also called to be holy. And this is why holiness can be thought of as a 'great disconnect'.

It is interesting that the word 'unholy' does not appear in the Bible. There are no two word phrases starting 'unholy' - that would have been a useless exercise to ask people to undertake. But is there really no opposite of 'holy'?

Words such as evil, sinful, or profane tend to be the opposite of other words (good, sinless, sacred) not holy. Certainly the divine holiness of God himself can have no opposite, as it represents something unique. But the holiness of being set apart or devoted to God does have an opposite, namely common, a word which applies to things such as utensils which are designated for ordinary use. Can it be applied to people also?

People who are not holy live 'ordinary' lives. But believers in Jesus are not meant to be ordinary. Like the ancient Jewish people, we are special as we are chosen. For this reason God gave the Jewish people a great deal of revelation about holiness. It was foundational to their identity. God didn't choose them because they were holy, but to make them holy. He set them apart so they could learn to show something of his nature. Israel remains a holy nation even if their journey of becoming holy has stuttered. But what about us? Are we any better in this calling? What about our 'disconnect'?

A key to understanding how to reduce our 'disconnect' is found in Hebrews 12; not the familiar 'without holiness no-one will see the Lord' (v14), but part of an earlier verse in the longer section on discipline. God disciplines us as a father disciplines his children. It is painful at times, but necessary; something worth enduring for our greater good. But notice how v10 ends. 'God disciplines us for our good, that *we may share in his holiness.*'

God often disciplined Israel for this purpose. So too us. How we respond to his discipline will determine how much we share in his holiness. Discipline is not to be equated with punishment (though it may include this), rather it is part of being disciplined.

To share in his holiness now we must submit to his discipline when it comes. To refuse or reject it means we stay at the lower level of holiness of the utensils and furnishings, rather than becoming greater servants as Isaiah was called to be. We will still be called holy, but by denying our calling to become holy we will stay disconnected and frustrated.

There are plenty of prayers for happiness, but not enough for holiness. Augustine used to pray, "Lord make me holy, but not yet". That sort of prayer does not connect us to a holy God or take us deeper into his presence. Let's not make that mistake! Here is a rather different prayer to help. I call this sort of prayer a 'dare' prayer. I dare you to pray it! But it is the kind of prayer that God is listening out for, that he longs to answer. Why not try it?

"Discipline me, my Father, that I may share in your holiness."

Or, if you're more daring, try "*Please* discipline me, my Father, that I may share in your holiness."