

“Sola Gratia” // Isaiah 6:1-7 //
SOLAS

If you have your Bibles begin turning to Isaiah 6. If you're using one of the Bibles in the pew rack you'll find our text on page 571.

The Vulgate

"sic enim dilexit Deus mundum ut Filium suum unigenitum daret ut omnis qui credit in eum non pereat sed habeat vitam aeternam"

For hundreds of years leading up to the Reformation, this is how the Scriptures were read in the churches of England. And those English congregants understood them about as well as you did. In the 4th century, Jerome had translated the Scriptures into Latin. His translation was called the Vulgate. By the 13th century, the Vulgate had gained near universal acceptance in the Catholic Church. From England to Paris, Rome to Geneva, every nation under the rule of the empire read from the Latin, regardless of the local common language.

Wyclif and the Lollards

A century before the reformation, a scholar at Oxford, John Wyclif, began translating the Scriptures into English and met in secret with groups of Christians to read the Bible in their own language. This prompted the Archbishop of Canterbury to forbid all translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular. Friends, in the 15th century, being found with a copy of the Bible in any translation other than the Latin was a capital offense.

John Foxe, a historian of Christian martyrs records the story of seven people who were burned alive at the stake in the city of Coventry on April 4, 1519. Their crime was simply teaching their children and family the Lord's Prayer in English.

Church we should be thankful to be in a room full of Bibles translated into English. And we should never take it for granted this will always be the case.

Well, God would use the seed of John Wyclif and the blood of martyrs to water a faithful vine that would grow in the garden of England.

This One Thing I Do

We don't know much about William Tyndale's early life. We believe he was born around 1494, in Dursley near Gloucestershire, in England.

William was a singularly focused young man. He had no wife or children. Instead he gave himself to the study of languages. He mastered English, French, Greek, Hebrew, German, Latin, and Spanish. Graduated with a Bachelors from Oxford University in 1512 and an M.A. in 1515. He then took up residency at Cambridge University and began working on his first edition of the Greek NT. As Tyndale experienced the blessing of being able to read and understand the Scriptures for himself, his heart broke for his countrymen who had virtually no access to read the Scriptures in their own tongue.

Shortly after leaving Cambridge John Fox tells us that “Master Tyndale happened to be in the company of a learned man and in communing and disputing with him, drove him to that issue that the learned man said, “We would be better off without God's laws than the pope's.” Master Tyndale hearing that, answered him, “I defy the poor and all his laws, and if God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth a plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou doest.”

At first, Tyndale tried to do the work of translation of the Bible into English through official channels. He travelled to London and sought the support of the Bishop Tunstall. The 1408 degree forbidding English Bible translations had one loophole. If a

Bishop signed off on the work it would be permissible. Tunstall was a leader who always had his thumb in the wind, discerning favorable outcomes above what was right, declined to support Tyndale.

At 30 years of age, Tyndale realized he would never fulfill God's call on his life in his home country. He crossed the channel into the continent of Europe. He would never see the land of his birth again.

Reformer on the Run

For the next twelve years he lived a life on the run. Dodging inquisitors, suffering defamation, he was shipwrecked once, and finally he was imprisoned.

While he was on the run, he diligently worked on his translation of the Scriptures from the original Greek and Hebrew into English. By 1525, his English New Testament was ready for publication. His first printer, a man named Peter Quentell in Cologne was raided by the authorities and shut down just as he was printing Matthew chapter 22. Tyndale escaped and moved upstream on the Rhine to Worms. There, a printer named Peter Schoeffer successfully printed several thousand complete copies of Tyndale's English NT. We still possess 3 copies of this printing today.

A Christian Conspiracy

Beginning in March of 1526, Christians began to conspire to import Tyndale's banned NT into England. One page at a time, single leaves of Tyndale's Bible were smuggled across the channel hidden beneath bales of cloth, or they were secretly packaged in watertight boxes in casks of wine and were shipped down the Rhine.

As ships docked at Norwich, Bristol, and London, conspirators would patch the individual leaves back together and the copies

were sold on the black market. John Foxe tells us that one farmer traded an entire wagonload of hay for the Epistle of James.

I love how Timothy George puts it:

“Literacy was on the rise but still not common. Those who did not know how to read gathered around others who did to hear for the first time the words of the New Testament read aloud in English Here and there, in the dark corners of the land, common folk gathered for such secret readings of Tyndale's New Testament. Imagine being in such a group and hearing for the first time the words from the Gospel of John: 'God so loved the world, that he gave his own Son for the intent, that none that believe in him should perish: But have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world, to condemn the world: But that the world through him, might be saved.'”

William Tyndale understood that one of the primary ways that God receives glory is when human beings as his creatures read, and understand, and trust, and cherish his Word. Tyndale was a man committed to the glory of God through the proclamation of his Word in the common tongue.

And that's our topic today as we close this series on the Reformation. Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. And there might not be another passages that describes the glory of God to us than Isaiah 6. So, if you have your Bible open let's read:

6 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

1. THE SOVEREIGN JUDGE

Let me set the stage for you here:

- Uzziah had been king for 52 years.
- He was a man of great influence.
- For the vast majority of his reign, he was a good man.
- Uzziah had extended the boundaries of the nation to their ancient extremes.
- Prosperity.
- Agricultural flourishing.
- Brought security.

The tragedy of Uzziah is that in the end he became prideful. He looked out at all he'd accomplished and he was filled with pride and would not give God glory. And God gave Uzziah terminal leprosy.

And the king died. When this happened, a kind of national panic set in. What will we do? Uzziah accomplished so much! How will we defend ourselves? How will we prosper? The nation had tied their eternal hopes to a temporal king — and he died! As the darkness of death closed in on Uzziah, of Israel's hope for the future.

As all of this is happening, Isaiah has a vision. He says

6 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

It's important to note here that this is a vision. And it was the only kind of vision that a created being can have of God.

You see, God does not have a physical body. I'm not sure if you knew that. We are told in John 1:18 that “no one has seen God.”

We are told in John 4:24 and Isaiah 31:3 that God is spirit. So, God does not have a body. Jesus Christ took on human flesh.

So how does Isaiah see that which has not been seen? He sees God because in this vision God has accommodated his infinite essence to Isaiah's finite capacities.

You say, I don't understand how that's possible. Well, me neither. That's why Evelyn Underhill once said—**if God was small enough to be understood, he wouldn't be big enough to be worshipped.**

The Apostle John also tells us in John 12:41 that this vision that Isaiah had was of the pre-incarnate Christ. Isaiah get a glimpse of the glory of King Jesus.

Do you realize what Isaiah is saying? “In the year that we lost our earthly king, I saw the real king. I saw the sovereign king.”

As S.M. Lockeridge once said, “You didn't elect this king. You can't impeach him, and his isn't going to resign.”

Friend, as long as you are looking to earthly kings, death and decay will terrify you.

Israel's history was that of waiting for someone better than Adam, someone better than Moses, someone better than David.

They needed a founder of a new human race, a true and better prophet, a greater King. The great glory and national pride of Judah were now facing an end, never to rise again.

In the year in which the old order ended God appeared to the prophet—and he revealed himself as the sovereign Lord. When the whole world falls apart and everything is crashing to pieces, God is still on the throne.

And he's seated. He's not running around the throne room wringing his hands, and wiping nervous sweat of his brow. There's never a vision of God mowing the lawn in heaven. He's never organizing the closet. He's seated.

You know when you sit? **You and I sit when things are as they should be.** I mean, sometimes we sit just because it's the end of the day and we did all that we could, even though it wasn't enough—but think about it. You sit when things are done, and as they should be. God is seated. Things are going according to his plan.

He's seated on the throne! The throne is the place of judgements and decrees! I'm glad we have a distribution of powers in our earthly government—because every single human being is corrupted with sin and ultimate power corrupts ultimately.

But there is coming a day when every power and lever of government will be consolidated. We will leave behind this democratic republic and we will eternally dwell in an absolute monarchy. He is the Supreme Court, and the Legislature, and the Chief Executive.

And he's high and lifted up, above all earthly woes, and above all earthly foes. From his position in heaven he can see everything you are going through. He can see everything that is happening in this nation. He doesn't need your Facebook page to alert him of when something is wrong with this world. He knows. His throne is higher than yours. His sight is better than

yours.

And his train fills the temple. His majesty has no end. It fills every space that he inhabits. His beauty is incomprehensible. The ancient church called this the beatific vision. It's a view of God's beauty that utterly changes you once you have seen it.

He is the sovereign Judge.

2. THE HOLY LORD

2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

In these verses we are introduced to a heavenly creature. The Seraphim (plural) seraph (singular).

This is the only passage of the Scriptures in which they are explicitly named. Their name literally means the “burning ones”.

Some have suggested that they physically looked like flames with their 6 wings. Some ancient depictions of the seraphim show them as winged serpents. I believe Isaiah gives them the name burning ones because of their ministry with the altar and the burning coals that we see a few verses later.

Just a few words about these creatures:

With two wings they cover their feet. They do this to signify the holiness of the ground on which they stand—you remember when God told Moses to remove his shoes because he was

standing on holy ground. They also cover their feet because they disavow any intention they have of choosing their own path. Their intent was to go only as the Lord commanded.

With two wings they cover their face. Their respect for God and his glory is such that they shield their eyes from his direct view.

There's a passage in the Lord of the Rings when the little Hobbit, Frodo is brought before a great queen. And he tells us that she seemed tall beyond measurement... terrible and worshipful, and ...beautiful beyond enduring

Some things are so beautiful that you want to gaze at them for hours. Here in the throne room is an view that is beautiful beyond enduring. It's so beautiful that you can't maintain your gaze.

The seraphs have been in God's presence from the beginning of creation and have ever shielded their eyes from his glory. Let that sink in.

But the most incredible thing about the seraphim is not what they look like, it's what they have to say:

The seraphim have one purpose: to attend to God's throne. They announce, from the day of their creation until the end of the world and beyond, the thrice holiness of the triune Lord. And they stand ready to purify anyone who dares approach the throne. This should cause us to shudder and tremble as Isaiah did.

This is their antiphonal song:

***“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”***

Normally, you and I think of holiness in moral terms (and holiness certainly carries a moral component). We say things like “he's holier than thou.”

But in the truest sense, holiness is about separation. When we say that something is holy it's separate. Distinct. Not common. And when the

The vision made such an impression on Isaiah that for the rest of his prophetic utterance his favorite designation of God was, “the Holy One of Israel.”

Notice that the word holy is repeated 3 times. Some have said the seraphim are ascribing holiness to all three persons of the trinity: Father, Son, & Spirit.

That's possible. But in Hebrew, when you really want to emphasize the superlative nature of something you double it. If you read the gospels, you'll see Jesus say, “truly, truly” all the time. He's communicating that his words are the truest of true words.

Isaiah triples the declaration of holiness. And you should also note that holiness is the only attribute in all of Scripture that is spoken of God in repetition three times. The Scriptures say that God is light—but never that he is light, light, light. Or they say that God is love, but never love, love, love. But the Scriptures do say that he's holy, holy, holy.

This is because there is no other attribute that better describes who God is in relation to us, his creation. He is other, separate, totally set apart.

When Isaiah is confronted with this holy God he is nearly torn apart in terror. He cries out, “Woe is me. For I am undone!” Literally, “I'm doomed.”

Listen to me, when people stand in fear before God, it's not so much the fear of a human standing before divine power, it's the terror of sin in the presence of unrelenting moral purity.

Think about what Isaiah says, “I am a man of unclean lips!” Isaiah was a prophet. If there was anything he could possibly brag about, it was his speech. That was his gift, his calling, that was what he was best at—and in the presence of the holy God his best withered.

You see, the holiness of God doesn’t make Isaiah ashamed of his weaknesses. It makes him look at his strengths and realize they aren’t strengths at all.

Now, I want you to think about this. In the past few years it’s been popular to write books and make movies about heaven. What it’s like. What God is like.

Understand this—Isaiah saw the throne room. But, Isaiah doesn’t cash in on his vision and write a best seller and sell devotionals.

I want you to read your Bible and pay attention to how often visions of God, angelic appearances, and the miracles of Jesus are connected with terror.

I’ve been doing this with the gospels lately. As I’ve read, every time an angel shows up, and every time someone receives a vision of God in heaven, or nearly every time a miracle is performed do you know how people respond? They are terrified!

People literally beg Jesus to leave them after he performs certain miracles.

Isaiah sees the Lord, he cries out, “Woe is me!” and he writes 66 chapters of woe on Israel, and the nations.

I say that because we say senseless stuff like, “Lord, just come down and be with us.” But if God ripped off this roof now we’d fall on our faces and panic.

A sign that you don’t understand who God is is that you think you do. “God, I think I have you figured out.”

A sign that you are really understanding God as he truly is, is that you start saying, “I haven’t begun to understand you! Woe is me!” Solomon said, “The heavens of highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built?”

He is the Holy Lord.

3. THE SAVING SACRIFICE

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah, having admitted his sin and his utter dread knows that he’s doomed. He cannot stand in God’s holy presence and live.

He knew Psalm 130:3 was true:

3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?

Friend, if in this moment, you died and stood before the Lord God in your sin you would be doomed. I would be doomed.

But look what happens:

One of the seraphim flies to the altar and takes a coal, and places it on Isaiah’s lips.

Now, you might be tempted to think of this as a purification by fire. You stick the fire onto something and it burns off the impurities.

But that’s now what this is. We see that metaphor used in the NT, but we don’t see that metaphor really at all in the OT.

Here’s what we do see in the OT. We see an altar, and we see a

sacrifice. God had told his people over and over that because of their sin, which separated them from God (because he is holy) they deserved to die. They deserved his wrath poured out on them.

But God was willing to accept a substitute in their place—and so he accepted the sacrifice of a lamb. This sacrifice would make them at one with God. Atonement.

The coal metaphor is not that God must purge sin from us with the heat of a fire. The coal represents a fire that has already been spent.

It's from a fire on an altar that has burned itself out on a substitutionary sacrifice. You see—Isaiah brought his sin with him into the temple. God has brought a saving sacrifice.

The coal was drenched in the blood of a lamb.

My friends, in a sense... Jesus is the one on the throne, but he was also the one on the altar—in Isaiah's place.

The vision began by telling us the Lord was high and lifted up.

Isaiah uses that phrase only one other time in Scripture... he uses it in the introduction to Isaiah 53, his description of Jesus' crucifixion.

Isaiah 52:13—

Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted....

3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

(Is 53:3–6)

You see, Jesus had an experience similar to Isaiah.

Jesus came face to face with God... and though his lips were pure, he reached down and became our sin.

But, unlike Isaiah, no angel came with a coal to cleanse his lips... because he was the Lamb who was given to die on that altar.

Instead of **feeling** like he would be torn apart, he was literally crushed.

What Isaiah feared and deserved—**death**—he never got. Jesus got it in his place—and in ours.

Who is this one who is high and lifted up? He is the one who was laid low in the grave for our sin.

Don't you see! What makes God glorious isn't just that he's high and exalted—it's that he's willingly made low for us.

1 Let all mortal flesh keep silence,

and with fear and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded,
for with blessing in His hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
our full homage to demand.

4 At His feet the six-winged seraph,
cherubim, with sleepless eye,
veil their faces to the Presence,
as with ceaseless voice they cry,
“Alleluia, alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord most high!”

He’s the sovereign judge. He’s the holy Lord. He’s the saving sacrifice.

On October 24, 1526 Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall preached a sermon against Bible translation and ordered Tyndale’s NT to be publicly burned in St. Paul’s churchyard. Sir Thomas More called Tyndale “the captain of our English heretics,” and “a hell-hound in the kennel of the devil.”

Tyndale was captured and put to death before he could complete his translation of the Old Testament. Tyndale was condemned at Augsburg at the emperors decree. On a sunlit day, October 6, 1536, William Tyndale was tied to a stake, strangled to death, and his body was burned. John Foxe tells us that before the chain around his neck strangled him Tyndale’s final cry was, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.

Though Tyndale was executed, the vine planted as the seed of Wyclif, watered by the blood of martyrs, and nurtured and brought to fruition by the work of Tyndale could not be uprooted. Once the people of God in England had tasted the beauty of the Word of God for themselves their appetite could not be quenched.

Tyndale’s dying prayer was answered only three years later. Two

years after his death 1539, under the supervision of the Archbishop Thomas Cranmer himself, the Great Bible was published and, by royal injunction, the Great Bible was to be placed in every parish in the realm.

Less than 100 years after his death, King James authorized an English translation that we still read today. The 1611 KJV Bible that many of you have read is nearly all Tyndale’s work. By 1640 over one million copies of the English Bible had been printed and distributed to pastors and even plow boys.

Praise God! The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God— and his glory will stand forever. Amen. Let’s pray.