

# Stendahl's Syndrome: The Holiness of God

Dr. Gary A. Schwarz

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Stendahl's Syndrome. Have you ever suffered from it? It isn't common, but if you ever visit northern Italy, watch out! Dr. Magherini, head of the psychiatric hospital at Florence warns, "Some tourists fall to the ground with heart palpitations thinking they're having a heart attack. Others suffer from delirium or disorientation. But what they're really having might be called a 'brush stroke.'" For what is Stendahl's Syndrome?" She explains, "Mix one tired and lonely tourist with a heavy dose of Michelangelo. Throw in a fresco by Giotto and a Bernini statue or two. Simmer to the familiar babble of the Italian language, and presto! You have another victim of art illness."

According to her research, some tourists just can't handle the dazzling array of art found in Florence. The sudden exposure to great masterpieces tips a delicate psychological balance and resurrects long-repressed fears. But she says most victims recover quickly. All it usually takes is just a phone call home. Or if the condition persists, the patient is told to cancel the rest of his vacation and return to the monotony of everyday life. Why? The doctor explains, "All they need to return to normal is a heavy dose of the familiar and the mundane."

Do you find this hard to believe? I did when I first read about it. I thought it was a joke. But apparently it happens. I find that fascinating for two reasons: 1) It points out how accustomed we are to the ordinary. Like someone living in a cave, we're so used to the darkness that it blinds our eyes when we come out into the light. 2) It gives us a small glimpse of how you and I would react if we witnessed the truly glorious. After all, if people are falling down in a faint from seeing something as mundane as Michelangelo's David, imagine how we'd react if we came face to face with the Risen Christ!

Let me share an example of what would happen if we did. In Revelation chapter 1, John the apostle has been banished to the Isle of Patmos for preaching the Word of God, when Jesus suddenly appears to him in all of His glory. So how does John react? Verse 12 says, "When I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire." Verse 17 adds, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead!"

Why did John have the reaction he did? Stendahl's Syndrome! When faced with the All Holy and Glorious Christ, the only thing he could do was fall at His feet in worship and awe. And friends, that is the same reaction you and I ought to have as we realize how holy He is. It ought to do more than spark our interest and imagination. It ought to shock us into being holy ourselves.

Our topic this week is the holiness of God, and my goal is to take us beyond the facts to the fundamental issue, which is to know Him more intimately, to love Him more passionately, and to strive to be like Him in all we think, do, and say. For that is the only path to the abundant life He came to give us. To help us get there, let me break this

topic down into these key points: 1) What it means to say that God is holy; 2) Why we want God to be holy; 3) How we ought to respond to God's holiness.

What do we mean when we say that God is holy? Several adjectives may come to mind—purity, righteousness, sinlessness—which are all accurate and helpful. But they don't get at the heart of it, because if you study the word "holy," you'll find it means something more basic than that. It means to be set apart as sacred and unique. For even though God is intimately involved in governing and sustaining His creation, He Himself is not a part of it. Like a brilliant conductor, He picks the players, He arranges the music, and He directs the performance, but He is not a member of the orchestra. He is uncommon, undefiled, and unlike anyone else we have ever known. This is why it is also impossible for us to understand mysteries like the Trinity (Three Infinite Persons sharing One Eternal Essence). To understand something new, we have to liken it to something we know. But in God's case, there is no one like Him. Speaking for the Lord Himself, Isaiah asked the idolatrous people of his day, "To whom then will you liken Me or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One." (Isaiah 40:25)

This also helps us understand Lucifer's sin a little better. Lucifer, now known as the devil, was the beautiful angel chosen by God to stand in His presence and guard His holiness. Instead, he was filled with pride boasting, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly...I will make myself like the Most High!" (Isa. 14:13-14 ) He was saying, "You aren't so special God! I could take your place and no one would miss you for a moment!" So he was cast out of heaven and replaced with four seraphs who now worship before God's presence night and day saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was, and is, and is to come." (Rev. 4:8)

Isaiah refers to this in chapter 6 of his prophecy. Beginning in verse 1 he says: "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 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!'" Notice three facts: First, their name. Seraph means "burning one," revealing how passionate they are in their worship of God. Lucifer disputes God's holiness, but his replacements live to proclaim it forever. Second, their wings. Seraphs are by definition angels who have never known sin at any time. Yet even in their lofty status as guardians of God's glory, they cover their eyes and feet in His presence. Why? Because He and the ground on which they stand is holy.

Most important of all, notice their words. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty." Why is this significant? Because this is the Hebrew way of emphasizing a point. In English, we do it by underlining a word or putting it in italics. But in Hebrew they do it by repetition. One example is in Genesis chapter 14 where we find the battle of the nine kings. The passage says in fleeing the scene, some of the warriors fell into the tar pits of the region. Another version translates it "asphalt pits." Still another says "great pits." Why the difference in translation? Because the Hebrew is unclear. The literal translation is "pit pits." Moses was saying, "There are pits, and then there are pits, and some pits are pittier than other pits. But these pits—"the pit pits"—were the pittiest pits of all!"

The Bible often repeats things for the sake of emphasis. But rarely does it repeat something three times because to three-peat something is to elevate it to the highest degree possible giving it supreme importance. That's what we find here. The seraphs do not say that God is "holy" or "holy, holy." They say He is "holy, holy, holy" to emphasize that this is far and away the most significant thing about Him. Nowhere in the Bible do we read that God is "love, love, love" or "just, just, just." But it does say that He is "holy, holy, holy," and that the whole earth is "filled with His glory," because this is the first and most crucial thing to grasp about Him—that He is higher, purer, and greater than anything we've ever known, and that He in His mercy is calling us to separate ourselves from the sinfulness of this world and be like Him in all we think, do, and say.

In his classic, "Mere Christianity," C.S. Lewis described God's plan for each of us like this: "The real Son of God is at your side. He is beginning to turn you into the same kind of thing as Himself. He is beginning, so to speak, to "inject His kind of life and thought into you; beginning to turn the tin soldier into a live man. The part of you that does not like it is the part that is still tin." I believe that is true. I believe that God is at work in your life today, drawing you to Himself and desiring to transform into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. The question is: Will you cooperate with His Spirit by putting down that part of you which is resisting Him and cutting out of your life the worldliness that is clouding your vision of Him? Ask Him and He will show you what that is. I want to behold His glory, and I believe you do too. But this is where it begins—with a recognition of His holiness and a commitment to separate ourselves from whatever keeps us from seeing Him as He is. Therefore, pursue holiness "without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb. 12:14)

But you say, "Why is it imperative to pursue His holiness?" Because many of our needs, though subtle, lead to serious illnesses if left unmet. One example is scurvy, a disease common among sailors for centuries until its cause was identified. Scurvy initially presented itself as spots on the skin, lethargy, and bleeding from the gums. Left untreated, it led to more serious things like loss of teeth, jaundice, fever, neuropathy, and death. Then the cause was identified—lack of vitamin C—citrus fruit was added to the diet and it all but disappeared. Our spiritual needs are like that too. Though not readily apparent, left unmet they will lead to spiritual illness. One such need is an understanding of God's holiness. So let's ask the question: In what positive ways does His holiness meet the needs of our souls? Let me name three:

**1. It prevents idolatry.** You say, "No one worships idols today!" But idolatry is not simply carving a statue out of wood and bowing down to it in worship. It is treating anything ordinary as if it is holy thereby robbing God of the glory He deserves. And by that definition, there has been a huge revival of idolatry in our day, especially in what's called the New Age Movement. For what is the New Age idea of God? That God is in everything and that everything is a part of God. But if that is true, then what does that make God? Not holy and unique, but common. And that's contrary to everything we've been learning about Him.

**2. It preserves justice.** A common topic of religious speakers is love. And that's good, because if there's anything the world has too little of, it's love. But there is a danger in putting too much emphasis on God's love and grace. That is the danger of

becoming unbalanced in our thinking and instead of believing in a holy God who hates sin, but loves sinners, we can find ourselves believing in a god who's like Santa Claus—ever giving but never holding us accountable for anything we do. R.C. Sproul illustrates this in his book, The Holiness of God.

*Our tendency to take God's grace for granted was driven home to me while teaching a freshman course in Bible college. On the first day of class, I went over the assignments carefully, knowing that term papers usually require a special degree of explanation. I explained that this course required three short papers and that the first one was due the last day of September. No extensions were to be given except for students who were physically ill or had deaths in their immediate families. If the paper was not turned in on time, the student would receive an "F." The students said they understood the requirements.*

*On the last day of September, 225 students dutifully handed in their papers while 25 students stood quaking in terror, full of remorse. "Oh, Professor. We are so sorry. We didn't budget our time carefully and make the adjustments from high school to college. Please don't give us an 'F.' Please give us an extension." I bowed to their pleas for mercy. "All right, I'll give you a break this time. But remember, the next assignment is due the last day of October." The students were profuse in their thanks and promised not to let it happen again. But when the last day of October came, only 200 students came with papers in hand. 50 were late. They were nervous but not in a panic. "Oh, Professor, it was Homecoming Week. It's also midterm, and all our other assignments are due as well. Please give us another chance. We promise we'll be on time with the next paper." Once more I relented. "OK, but this is the last time. If you're late for the next paper, it will be an 'F.' No excuses. No whining. Is that clear?" "Yes. You're terrific, Professor, and we all love you," the class began to sing.*

*Can you guess what happened the last day of November? 150 students came with term papers, while the other hundred strolled into the lecture hall utterly unconcerned. "Where are your term papers?" I asked. One student replied, "Don't worry, Prof. We're working on them. We'll have them for you in a couple of days. No sweat!" I picked up my lethal black grade book and began taking down names. "Johnson, do you have your paper?" "No, sir," came the reply. "F," I said as I wrote the grade in the book. "Muldaney, do you have your paper?" Again, "No sir," was the reply. I marked another "F" in the book.'*

*The students reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest, "That's not fair!" I looked at one of the students. "Lavery, you think it's not fair?" "No," he growled in response. "I see. So it's justice you want? I recall that your last paper was also late. If you insist on justice, that's what you'll get. I'll not only give you an 'F' on this assignment, I'll also change your last grade to the 'F' you so richly deserved." The student was stunned. He had no more arguments to make. He apologized for being hasty and was suddenly happy to settle for one 'F' instead of two. The students had taken my mercy for granted, and when justice fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged. And this, after only two doses of mercy in the space of two months.*

So it is with God's justice. Something inside us tells us that He owes us His mercy and that He's cruel if He judges us for our deeds. But then we study His holiness, and we find that there is a balance in His character. Not only is He merciful, He is also "holy, holy, holy," and unable to tolerate sin in His presence. So what did He do both to satisfy His justice and prove His love to us? He sent His Son to die for our sins. The Cross is both the greatest display of God's holiness and the perfect evidence of His love, because it not only reminds us that a holy God must punish sin, but that He also loves us so much that He sent His Son to die in our place. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

**3. It provides security.** Our first reaction to God's holiness is fear, because it reminds us how sinful we are. But when we come to Him repenting of our sins and trusting Jesus as our Savior, our fear is soon replaced by a sense of security and comfort, because it means we now have something certain we can rely upon. You see, with a sinful father, there is never any consistency. What he requires tonight, when he's tired and hungry, may be entirely overlooked tomorrow when he's rested and well-fed; and what he overlooks tomorrow, when he's rested and well-fed, may be greeted with the back of a hand when his stress level skyrockets. You just never know, because the standards are always changing. But with a Holy Father, you never have to worry where you stand. His holiness assures us that He'll be the same yesterday, today, and forever.

So let me encourage you. Do not shrink away from God's holiness in fear. Embrace it as one of His life-giving attributes which cures our idolatry and assures us of His consistent character and love. And finally, let me answer the question: How should we react to God's holiness? There are two right responses: holy awe and holy living.

**1. Holy Awe.** Isaiah is a good example of the first response for if anyone ever had it together, it was Isaiah. Respected as one of the most righteous men of his day—a model of honesty and integrity—what happened when he met the Lord? His self-esteem crumbled and every nerve in his body shook with fear, so much so that he cried out in Isaiah 6:5: "Woe to me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips...for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Some versions read "ruined" instead of "undone." But "undone" is the best translation for what Isaiah suffered was what psychologists call personal disintegration. At the sight of God's holiness, his entire personality began to come apart.

To most of us, God reveals our sinfulness a little at a time, so that we gradually see our need for growth and change. But in Isaiah's case, He did so all at once, leaving the prophet devastated. You see, as long as we compare ourselves with others, we feel pretty good about ourselves. Because even though you're better than me in one area, I'm better than you in another. But when measured against God's perfect holiness, the result is Stendahl's Syndrome. When faced with the Holy, our only recourse is to fall before Him in repentance and awe.

I had such an experience my second year of college. Though I was raised in the church, I didn't grow up believing in Christ. I wanted to believe, but because I'd never sensed His presence in my life, I grew up agnostic doubting that God was real. Then the

religion class I was taking at the University of Puget Sound visited a large Episcopal Church in Seattle. There was no preaching or altar call at the end of the service. But the atmosphere of that church was so reverent that at the end of the service, two of my classmates and I went forward to pray. There for the first time in my life, I felt God's presence. It was so overwhelming that not only did I drop to my knees in repentance, but several days later, when a friend shared the truth with me about Jesus, I accepted Him as my Savior and have been joyfully following Him ever since.

Have you had such an experience? If so, you know it's both the sweetest and most unnerving experience in life—sweet because of how glorious He is and unnerving because of the way it exposes your sinfulness. But then, God is too kind to leave us feeling undone, isn't He? For what did He immediately do to relieve Isaiah's anxiety? He sent an angel to touch his lips and remove his sin. Then, having cleansed his sin, God called him into holy service. Isaiah recalls in verse 8, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am. Send me!'" That is the second reaction we ought to have, not only holy awe, but also—

**2. Holy Living.** The Dutch have a saying for when there's an awkward lull in the conversation. They say, "Er gaat een Domine voorbij," which means, "A minister walked by!" The point is: Nothing kills the merrymaking quicker than the presence of a clergyman. Once the minister arrives, the fun is over. No more joking. No more laughter. Only solemn seriousness from then on. As a pastor, I used to feel badly about that. I'd be talking with someone at a party when they would ask, "So what do you do for a living?" "Oh, I'm a pastor," I'd say. At which point, they'd become nervous and start apologizing for the colorful language they were using. So I'd try to put them at ease by reminding them. "Don't worry about it! I'm only human too." But no longer! Now I say, "Let them stew. Being ashamed of our bad language and behavior is a good thing." (-:

Why do I mention that? First, to ask you: Has the presence of Christ made a difference in your life? After all, if the presence of a pastor can evoke such a drastic change in our behavior, what sort of changes should the presence of a holy God inspire? Second, to ask you: What impact are you making on those around you? I'm not suggesting that we who love Christ should walk around polishing our halos, trying to impress people with our holiness. That wouldn't be true righteousness. That would be what the Bible calls self-righteousness, which impresses no one, least of all God. But if we do love Jesus, there ought to be an infectious goodness about our lives. Peter commands us, "Just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do! For it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:15-16) You say, "That's a tall order. How am I ever going to achieve that?" The answer is: Relationship. Nobody becomes like Christ through a "get-holy-quick" program. The only way to become like Him is by spending time in His presence, letting His glory gradually change you into His likeness.

Moses exemplified this principle. When leading the children of Israel through the wilderness, Moses got his marching orders by meeting with the Lord. But when he came away from speaking with God, what did the people see? His face shining with God's glory! So Moses would put a veil over his face to keep the people from being alarmed by its radiance. And that's the same way we become like Christ. Not by human effort and self-righteousness. It's by spending time every day in His presence. 2 Corinthians

3:18 explains, "But we all with unveiled faces, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

You say, "That's what I want. In fact, there's nothing I want more than to be like Jesus!" Then start spending more time in His presence. You may struggle in your efforts to pray and read your Bible consistently. Or like me, you may not always feel like you're making a powerful connection with God. But don't give up! Perfection isn't necessary to obtain the changes you want. The truth is our efforts to connect with Him in this life will always be a struggle. That's why it's described as beholding His glory "as in a mirror." As long as we have to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil, we'll have difficulty focusing our minds and seeing Him as He is. But that's OK. His glory is powerful enough to pierce the fog and effect the changes He wants. The key is to keep at it, taking time every day to be still and know that He is God. Take time to do that today. Pick up your Bible, pour out your heart to Him in prayer, and sing a song in worship of Him. His promise is: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." (James 4:8)