

Woe is Me!
Isaiah 6:1-7, Job 42:1-6 & Luke 5:1-11
Argyle – 9/17/17 – Truths that Sustain Spiritual Vitality

Introduction to Scripture

When I moved to Washington County in 1986 there were 9 Presbyterian churches in Washington County with full time pastors. Today there are only two of us. And Presbyterian churches aren't the only ones who have been experiencing decline in our area. A question we are going to consider over the next few weeks is, "Is this kind of decline inevitable?"

Within our own church there have been periods of growth and decline. In the first 50 years of the village church's existence, 650 people joined the church. Three of our buildings were torn down because the congregation had outgrown them. Shortly after this building was built in 1876 the church went into a cycle of decline that lasted for several decades. But then at the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century we went through another growth spurt. Over the last few years we have leveled out and the question is, "Is decline inevitable?"

As students of the Bible and church history, we might be tempted to answer "Yes." Growth followed by decline seems to be a pattern throughout the Old Testament. Those periods of decline were often the result of disobedience and idolatry. We've seen this tend in church history, as well. This year we have been celebrating the 500th year of the Protestant Reformation that swept over Europe and

led to amazing growth in the church, yet today, much of Europe is a spiritual wasteland.

I love to read about the Welsh Revival of 1904 & 1905. Churches were packed and jails were empty. Orphanages were closed as all the children were adopted by Christians. Other than traffic control before and after worship services, the police had little to do. So, they started forming barbershop quartets to sing at the church services. My favorite story is about how the revival impacted the coal mines. Work came to a complete stop because the mules could not understand the commands of their handlers. They were used to being cursed at and it took them awhile to get used to the new sanctified language of the converted coal miners. Yet today, less than 1% of the population of Wales attends church on Sundays and there is talk about the death of the Welsh Church. Is decline evitable?

Is decline inevitable or can a church or a group of churches experience sustained growth and vitality without going through periods of decline? Our guide as we consider this question will be Richard Lovelace's book *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* ([picture](#)). Richard was a church historian at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He was my advisor when I was a student there and Kim and I were in a small group with Richard and his wife, Betty Lee. Spending time with the Lovelace's expanded our vision for the world and our longing for revival in the church. Almost every day I pray for spiritual awakening in our church and in our area. That is something I learned from Richard Lovelace. Some of you may remember Richard and Betty Lee

as they worshipped with us occasionally when they retired to Saratoga Springs.

Richard even taught a night class on this material for us.

Lovelace argues that there are four primary Biblical truths that keep us from going through spiritual declines. If we understand and embrace these truths, we and the church will experience sustained spiritual vitality. These primary truths are...

1. We are accepted
2. We are delivered.
3. We are not alone.
4. We have authority.

These four things are true of us if we are in a relationship with Jesus Christ. These are the benefits of our salvation. Yet, many of us live as if they are not true. Lovelace writes that when we fail to understand any of these truths that result from our relationship with Christ, it will lead to “distortions and deficiencies in the church’s experience.” So it is possible for us to be Christians and to be part of a Biblically faithful church, and yet, to not experience the riches and blessings of our position in Christ. Too many of us who are co-heirs with Christ, live as spiritual orphans. It is as if we are heirs of some wealthy family, but are living in a homeless shelter because we do not understand and embrace the riches that are ours in Christ. So, over the next several weeks we are going to look at these four primary benefits of our relationship with Jesus.

But first, there is something else we need to consider. As sad as it is that many Christians are needlessly living spiritually impoverished lives, there is an even greater tragedy. There are many people in the church who know about Jesus, but have never embraced him and become a part of his family. Studies show that as many as 40% of the people who attend church in America are not Christians. That means that some of you don't know Jesus. The problem is that we don't understand two things...

1. The depth of God's holiness
2. The depth of our sin

That brings us to the first of this morning's Scripture passages, Isaiah 6. (Read) (Pray

The Depth of God's Holiness

The first thing we need to understand in order to come to faith in Jesus Christ and to be his co-heir is the depth of God's holiness. I read a story this week of a pastor who invited his congregation to join him in praising God by calling out God's attributes by finishing the sentence, "Lord, you are..." So the pastor prayed, "Lord you are..." and someone in the congregation said, "Loving." Another added "Merciful." "Gracious"... "Kind,"..."Compassionate" and so it went. If Isaiah had been there that morning, he might have yelled out "Terrifying."

In calling Isaiah to his ministry as a prophet, God gave Isaiah a glimpse of his holiness. Isaiah saw God sitting on a throne, high and exalted. The train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were heavenly creatures called seraphs. This is the only time seraphs appear in the Bible. They are like God's cheerleaders calling out to

one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. It was an awesome with a capital “A” scene.

Notice how Isaiah responded to this vision of God’s holiness. He didn’t stand watching in amazement. He didn’t join in the seraphs worship. He was terrified. He cried out “Woe is me. I am ruined.”

Job had a similar experience. He was struggling to figure out why he had suffered so greatly. So, he asked God answered him, not with an explanation, but with a series of questions. “Where were you when I laid earth’s foundations?” “Who marked off its dimensions?” “Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place.” There are four chapters in the Book of Job of questions that God asked Job. In response to Job’s questions, God asked Job a series of questions that revealed his holiness.

At the end of it Job replied to the LORD: “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. ³ You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. ⁴ ‘You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ ⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:2-6)

R.C. Sproul writes, “The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that

God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of His glory” (Holiness of God).

What does it mean that God is holy? Think back to Isaiah and Job’s experiences. How would they answer that question? They would probably have trouble coming up with words. That is still the challenge we have in explaining God’s holiness. In one sense it is beyond our understanding. One thing they would say is that God is radically different than us. He is glorious, majestic, pure and just plain scary. He is unlike any other being that exists. God is God and that puts him in a class all by himself. So to say that God is holy is not like just listing another characteristic about him. It is not that he is loving and merciful and just and holy. No, to say that God is holy is to say something about his essential being. He is holy loving and holy merciful and holy just.

The Israelites sang, “Who is like Thee among the gods, O LORD? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11)
 The psalmist wrote, “There is no one like Thee among the gods, O Lord; Nor are there any works like Thine. All nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord; And they shall glorify Thy name. For Thou art great and doest wondrous deeds; Thou alone art God” (Psalm 86:8-10)

The first thing we need to understand in order to come to faith and to become a co-heir with Jesus Christ is the depth of God’s holiness.

The Depth of our Sin

The second thing we need to understand is the depth of our sin. When given a vision of God's holiness, Isaiah said, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Likewise when Job came face to face with God's holiness he said, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

I would like to introduce one other witness to God's holiness and that is Peter. Many of you are familiar with this incident in Luke 5 where Jesus borrowed Peter's boat in order to teach the crowds. After he was done teaching, Jesus said, "Let's go fishing!" Peter and his co-workers had been fishing all night, but had caught nothing. Probably the last thing they wanted to do was go fishing, yet, because it was Jesus they threw out their nets. But this time the nets were so full that they began to tear. When Peter saw this he fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!" This miracle exposed Peter to Jesus' glory and his response is the same as Isaiah's and Job's. "I'm in trouble. I am a sinner in the presence of holiness."

When we begin to understand the depth of God's holiness we begin to understand the depth of our sinfulness. But if we have a low view of God, we will think that we can earn his approval. If God is just some ordinary deity, we can please him with our good works. But if God is the God who Isaiah, Job and Peter encountered, we are in trouble because of our sin. We have nothing to give him that

will bridge the gap between his holiness and our sin. We are totally at his mercy and that is the place we need to be in, in order to do what he calls us to. God calls us to acknowledge our sin and turn from it. He calls us to submit our lives to his Lordship. He calls us to die to ourselves and follow Jesus. This is not a slight course change in the direction of our lives, but an about face. It is radical change that makes absolutely no sense... unless God is holy and we are sinners.

When we begin to appreciate the depth of God's holiness and the depth of our sin, we are open to God's saving work in our lives. We are willing to accept his solution to our sin problem by believing in Jesus' death on the cross on our behalf and to submit our lives to his Lordship. As a result you are accepted! You are delivered! You are not alone! You have authority! But to get to that point, you need first to understand the depth of God's holiness and the depth of our sin.

Conclusion

As we get ready to embark on this exploration of truths that sustain spiritual vitality I ask you, "Do you have spiritual vitality to sustain. Are you a Christian, a co-heir with Christ, a sinner who has been saved not by your good works, but by God's grace which you have received through faith? If you are not sure, I would encourage you to reflect on Isaiah 6. Unless you understand the depth of God's holiness and the depth of your sin, there will be no place for Jesus in your life.