

The Language of Faith: Part One

Speakers: Tim Mackie, Jon Collins

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, this is the first of a new, three-part series that represents a series of teachings that I did when I was a teaching pastor at Door of Hope. We did a teaching series over just the most common vocabulary words of the Bible and of Christian faith that are also words that are hardly used in modern Western culture—or if they are used, they're used in ways that are totally different than how they're used in the Bible. And so we wanted to both qualify, resurrect, or give new meaning to these old terms and how important they are.

This is the first of four. In this first teaching, I explore the biblical word and concept of "holiness"—of God's holiness, of people's holiness—the story underneath it all, and so on. It's a really important idea for understanding Christian and biblical faith. So there you go. Let's dive in and see what the Scriptures have to say.

[Musical break (01:59–2:04)]

But the language of faith—what are we doing in this series? We're taking about three months, and each week we're considering a different word—but not just so that we

learn more words—not like reading a dictionary. We’ve chosen—we could have chosen many—but we tried to choose twelve of the words that are part of a “core vocabulary” for how a follower of Jesus thinks and views the world.

A part of what makes following Jesus hard—there’s many things that are hard about following Jesus—one of them is living in a culture whose values and story are so shaped by so many other different things. But being a Christian means cultivating these categories—these ways of thinking about God and ourselves and the world, and where we are and what the real problems are. You have to consciously adopt a *new* way of thinking about everything. And vocabulary is how we do that.

And so we’re taking these core words, you know, of the Jewish and Christian tradition: faith, or freedom, holiness—we’re going to look at today—or righteousness, glory, salvation, atonement—really core words that none of us use in day-to-day conversation [Tim laughs].

So it’s no surprise that following Jesus is hard because even the vocabulary is foreign to us. It’s not integrated into our lives. And so we wanted to take a few months—this is like “Christian Grammar 101” or something like that—but I hope way more interesting than that. [Tim laughs] That sounds really boring, actually. But “the language of faith” sounds more interesting.

So what we’re talking about today is “holiness.” We’re trying to approach the series, or the flow of ideas, from kind of an “A to Z,” and build them into, kind of, a story. And so we’ve talked about what *faith* is, according to Jesus’s teachings. We’ve talked about what *freedom* is—rooted in the Good News about Jesus. Today, we’re considering God’s holiness, which will then lead us, kind of, in a story, into—this is about God and then about who we are, and what the problems are—and sin, salvation, and so on.

So God’s *holiness*. Here’s a word that you haven’t used in the last week—*holiness*, anyone? It just didn’t come up. And I don’t think you need to feel bad about that, necessarily. It’s just a reality about modern English. I don’t know what occurs to you when you hear the word “holiness.” My hunch—because I’m a Western American, just like you—my hunch is that the word “holiness” exists in this realm of “religious vocabulary,” and it’s part of the religious vocabulary about “morality.”

Here’s one way that you might hear someone use the word, is: if you have a coworker, or a friend or something, and they became “religious”—right?—they “got religion.” And then they’re starting to make all these changes in their lives. And then there are some people at work who might be bummed that this person isn’t doing—whatever—with them anymore, after work gets over.

And so they'll say something to the effect of like, "She became religious. She thinks she's 'holy' or something—"holier-than-thou." Are you with me? There is a common use of the word "holy" in English—it's somewhere like that. It has to do with being a religious, moral person. That's "holiness" in our culture.

And this is one of those things where, that's like—it's not even a half-truth. It's like an eighth-truth—it's a sixteenth-truth [Tim laughs]. "Religious morality," it is a part, but it's a small—and way down the line, in terms of what's really important about this idea—it's a small part of a much richer, I think, more beautiful truth.

Part of becoming a Christian and adopting this vocabulary is coming to the place where I see—like, the modern world, the modern Western world, is actually impoverished because it doesn't have this vocabulary anymore. And "holiness" is one of those things, I think. Here's why.

I had the chance to go on a retreat with some coworkers out to eastern Oregon earlier this week. It was, like, really hot here—remember when it was really hot? It's hard to remember that on a day like today—which is a glorious Portland day, today is. But it was really hot last weekend. And last Monday—it was, like, in the eighties here. So I hopped over the mountain to eastern Oregon, around Kah-Nee-Ta, Warm Springs—or not Kah-Nee-Ta, but near there—Warm Springs. And it was *ninety-five* out there last Monday, and so I had the retreat day.

And then that night, I went with some friends and we just went out and laid under the stars—it was just a crystal-clear night. And there's no light pollution out there. And it was just one of these—it's been so long since I had done something like this. We just laid there for nearly two hours, just staring at the Milky Way [Tim laughs]—because it was so clear. Like, it's so hard to see it in Portland, but when you go away where there's no light pollution, you just can stare for a long time—you know what I'm talking about?—the bands of the Milky Way just streak across the sky.

And you know, where there's so little light, the sky is alive with shooting stars, with satellites—different kinds of satellites—the ones that spin, and so they flash on and off—you know what I'm talking about? Occasionally they'll do a little [Tim vocalizes] burst of light. And then there's just the, whatever, the effect of the light coming through our atmosphere—of stars flickering, and their different hues and colors and so on.

It was amazing. It was amazing. How many of you have recently laid under the night sky for an hour? Good for you. We all admire you [Tim laughs]—and you're better humans for it, I bet, and we should all be like you when we grow up. [Tim grins] You're obligated as a human being to do this, at least on an annual basis—that's what I've decided now. It was so remarkable. It was just so amazing.

And as we were laying there staring up, there were these long periods of silence—that was never awkward. It was never awkward because there was actually the appropriate response [Tim laughs] to the majesty and the mystery and the grandeur of everything opening up. Now, I can't recreate that experience for you, but what I was experiencing, laying there, just awestruck, is the effect that something *holy* and *transcendent* has on human beings.

It's the effect of—maybe you go up the gorge, go up to the mountain, I don't know, wherever—go up the coast—it's when you get into an environment where, all of a sudden, it's not familiar—it's not human-made anymore. Like in the city, we're surrounded by everything that we've made. So we think that we're the center of the universe—which it's hard to deny that when you're in the center of a city, which is a little universe that we make for ourselves.

But you get out of that. And you're reminded that, like, “Oh yes—I'm so tiny. [Tim laughs] My life is relatively insignificant in the grand scheme of things, and I'm mortal and frail,” and all that kind of thing. And you just—you face your smallness when you look at a majestic—you guys know what I'm talking about?

And I know some temperaments, like, gravitate towards these kinds of experiences, and they tend to be people who live in their heads a lot—and I'm one of those. And so whatever, you actually may spend a lot of your waking hours trying to avoid having experiences like that because it freaks you out. But I think you're obligated to at least spend one night staring up at the stars a year.

There was one saying—and this was cool, when we were out there—my friend was more acquainted with the architecture of the constellations and so on. And so he was trying to look for the Andromeda Galaxy, which is the closest galaxy to the Milky Way. But one thing that I kept seeing—but I wasn't sure—because when I looked at it straight on, it actually wasn't really there. But when I looked to the side of it, it was there—do you guys know what I'm talking about? Have you had that experience?

And so it was very clear: it looked like a star. But it had a clear, circular shape to it. It was bigger than a star, but when I looked at it, it wasn't quite there. And so then I went hunting around to Wikipedia, you know, the next day, like, “What was it—what were you looking at?” And so on. [Tim gestures to visual] And I'm pretty sure it was this. It's called the Omega Centauri cluster.

And to the naked eye, it appears like a star, or a planet—and even to old, super old-school telescopes, and so on, it was so dense that it appeared as an object—but with higher-powered telescopes, now, they can look at it. And this is a Hubble—Hubble Space photograph, right into the heart and center of that thing, of Omega Centauri.

So let's back up again, for the effect. So you can make out this disk—it's a cluster—a density of stars. It's within the Milky Way—it's in our galaxy. And it's relatively close—it's only 16,000 light-years away. [Tim laughs] Do you remember a light-year? 193,000 miles-a-second—so it's really far. However, it's really billions of miles away. It's relatively close, though, in terms of the scope of the universe. And so it's a cluster of stars.

And then when Hubble zooms into it, it's this. And this is a density of some *10 million* stars. It's the Omega Centauri cluster. It's 150 light-years across. And these stars, some of them, the colors aren't what our eyes would see them as. It's different coloring technology. But they're all burning a different number of strengths. Some are more powerful than our sun, and [some] are less powerful.

The energy output of Omega Centauri is *4 million* times the energy and heat of our sun that we orbit around. That's what's generating out of this thing. And the reason is because the stars are so close. They're 0.1 light-years apart from each other, on average, which is, you know, it's still, [Tim laughs] like, a ridiculous number of miles. But in sun-space, that's relatively close.

So there you go: Omega Centauri. That's just one tiny mote, “node,” of light in the night sky. Where do we live, you guys? [Tim grins] You thought the Wizard of Oz was a strange land—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying? We live in *that*—it's even more weird. Look at this—are you with me? No, I can't recreate the experience I had the other night, but I'm trying. [Tim laughs] I'm trying.

And I don't know what you're like when you hear this kind of thing, but that's it—like, you feel small—you feel frail. The timeline of your life, all of a sudden, becomes just a speck. And you realize there is grandeur and space and expanses of time and energy and power at work in our universe that you will never even be able to conceive of in our short little lives—and then we die.

[Tim grins] And you're worried about how many “likes” you had on your Instagram photo yesterday—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying? It's like, “it's so stupid.” None of us—right?—none of that matters. That's the effect that something transcendent and holy and “other” has on us human beings. It's a powerful experience—it's universal to the human experience, here on planet Earth.

And it's something that the story of the Bible, in its depiction of God's character, really locks in on that experience, and says that there's something real there—that there's a truth that we're becoming aware of, about our place in the universe and about the “other” that is behind all of this. And the word used to describe that experience and that reality is this word.

And the first person who has an experience like what I had under the stars, but cranked up—volume at eleven—is a story that uses the word “holy” for the first time in the Bible. As you’re reading from page one, moving on, you come across the word “holy” at some point, for the very first time. And it’s a story about a man who has a way more intense experience than what I had.

It’s a story about a guy named Moses, in the book of Exodus 3. You can open there, or turn on your Bible—it’s going to be up here on the screen. And it’s probably a familiar story to you, but there’s some elements here that are always surprising and really profound to me.

There’s Moses. Moses—you’ve read the story or seen the movie—he’s a fugitive, right? At this point, he fled Egypt, where he was raised—he lost his temper and murdered an Egyptian, and he had to flee—but he’s now decades into his life in exile. He’s a shepherd. He’s been a shepherd for decades. And so he’s out, you know, cruising the desert lands with his flock.

And here’s the story: “Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness. And he came to *Horeb*, the mountain of God. And there the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire, from within a bush. Now Moses saw that even though the bush was on fire, it wasn’t burning up.” Do bushes burn fast or slow—a dry bush out in the forest? So it burns, and typically really intensely. That’s why it’s so fun to throw, like, pine needles onto a fire, or whatever—right, dry branch bushes, and so on—bush branches, and so on, so, because they consume quickly.

So imagine—just put yourself in the scenario. It’s a vivid story. It’s appealing to our visual imagination. So you come upon a bush, and it’s—first of all, you’re wondering, “Oh, spontaneous combustion? Why is this thing on fire?” And then you think, “Okay, this should be over in, like, thirty seconds. This is how bushes burn. And then, like, it’s not over. It just keeps—it actually keeps getting more intense. And it’s just full power—consumption, fire—but the, but the bush still has its integrity at the center of it. Are you with me? Is this odd? This is very odd. This is very odd.

So part of what makes an experience with transcendence, and otherness, and holiness—because all of a sudden, we live our day-to-day lives and, just, our everyday framework, and we’re all concerned about how many people “like” our photos, and this kind of thing—like that’s all man, human-made, and so we are the center of it.

And then all of a sudden, we have experiences that remind us that we are not at the center. And you’re just overwhelmed by the scale and the grandeur of the universe. And there’s all this stuff that just blows all my reference categories—are you with me? So it’s—on a miniature scale: I’m laying there with my friends, having that. And now here’s

Moses, right? And he knows these lands well. He shepherded them for decades. And then here's something that just *breaks* everything he thought he knew about the world—and it's encountering him.

And what's his first response? This is interesting—what's his first emotional response? He thought, "Well, I'm going to go over and see that strange thing. That's just very odd." [Tim laughs] Right? "Why isn't that bush burning up?" So it's surprise and curiosity—you with me? It's like, "Oh, whoa—the world's a stranger place than I thought when I woke up this morning"—you know—"Here's the bush and it's doing something I've never seen a bush do before," and it's outside of what he thought was possible.

It's curiosity, *mystery*. That's what encounters with the transcendent do to us, right? They stir our imagination. We go, "Whoa, it's—whoa, where am I? What's happening?" So "I'm going to go over and see the strange sight"—that's stage one of this encounter with the holy. But the story goes on.

"And when the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses.' And Moses said, 'I'm right here.'" [Tim laughs] Very bizarre story—like, put yourself in the moment. What would you say? Like, you're laying there, looking at the sky—and it's just, "*Tim* . . . [Tim laughs] *Tim*." What would you say? "I'm right here. [Tim laughs] Here I am." So that's surprising.

Then what the voice says is this: "Don't come any closer. Stop right there. *Stop*. Take off your sandals. The place where you're standing is *holy* ground"—it's the first time the word is used in the Bible. "Then God said, 'I'm the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.' And at this, Moses hid his face because"—what's his emotional response now? It's not curiosity anymore. It's terror—fear—he was afraid to look at God.

So think about how this experience goes. It goes from surprise that generates curiosity and wonder to, then he's having a personal encounter with the presence of the creator God. And then it turns from curiosity to absolute terror. He's confronted with all kinds of realities. The story doesn't say—it leaves you, as the reader, up to put yourself in Moses's shoes and fill in the experience: what you would feel like, with your mortality, with your smallness, with the, "Oh my gosh, this is not a space that I should be in right now"—but that's just what he's feeling.

And while we don't learn, in this story, what it is that makes God holy—just pause, we'll get there—what we do learn is that the space around God radiates with God's own holiness. So "holiness" is like a power or energy—it's connected with fire in this story. And then around God is a space that's holy. And how is Moses supposed to relate or treat this "holy space," that he surprisingly encountered? He's supposed to take off his shoes.

So there's something in the story here. It gets you thinking like, what? There's something—Moses has a normal way of existing, and being *outside* the space. But now that he's in this space, he's in personal proximity to the holy—to the source of all of the wonder and beauty in the universe—and then that space is also holy, which means what? And what is his relationship to it?

So here we'll nerd out for just a second. The Hebrew word—try a crack at it. You can do it—it's not a hard one: *qadosh*. Yeah, *qadosh*. And we're going to see—in its uses that we're going to look at today, all across the Bible—its most basic meaning is: referring to something or someone that's unique—utterly unique, one-of-a-kind—and therefore, set apart.

And then there can be things associated with the holy one, and then those things, or people, or places, become designated, or *qadosh*, also. So God is *qadosh*—but this story is focusing on the space *around* God that becomes *qadosh* as well. And so Moses has to change—he has to change his normal way of existing to be in that space. And you might think like, *okay*—maybe that makes sense to you, I don't know.

Think back to me laying, looking up at the sky with my friends. If one of my friends—we had cell service out there—it was really surprising and disappointing, actually—but we had cell service. And if one of my friends had pulled out their phone, or something, you know—we're just out there, it's a quiet moment, and then he wants to show me a video of his cat on YouTube, or something like that, [Tim laughs] you know?

And it would be: “Put that away. It's so inappropriate right now”—are you with me? You would think that too. That's dishonoring, right? The mystery and the beauty of this space and this moment, before the grandeur of the sky—it's like *that*. It's like there's something about being in the presence of such power and purity that there's something on his shoes that have to stay behind.

Now, the gesture of “taking off your sandals,” there's been a lot of discussion about this throughout the history of interpretation, and people reading and thinking about this story. Some people think that it connects to the still-common practice, in many cultures, of the “no shoe policy,” in your house. And so this is God inviting Moses “into his house.” It's hospitality. I think that's wrong—but it could be right. I don't think I'm wrong, but I could be.

But I think it's way more likely that the majority of people through Jewish and Christian history are right, when they're saying that there's something about the bottom of his sandals that's inappropriate to bring into the sacred space. I think that's what's going on here.

Now, what does he do for a living? He's a shepherd—do you get it? [Tim laughs] I mean, it's not hard to get. I think, if you're not a shepherd, you don't think about it. But what does he walk on all day long? The poop and the pee of these animals, right? And their blood and mucus and bodily fluids and hair—are you with me? And not just that, then the dirty bugs and the creature—right?—so, dirt. So that's almost certainly what's going on here.

What's on the—it's the same reason that it's weird for you to get into bed with your shoes on. That's *gross*—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying?—don't ever do that. It's the same reason you don't want to eat your dinner in the bathroom, because that's *gross*—right?—it's gross. There are things in that space that you think are going to be on your food—but you'll brush your teeth in the bathroom. [Tim laughs] So, but shoes is different. Shoes—it's, you know, you don't lick your shoes, right? You're stepping on grease and dirt and bugs and—are you with me?

So there are things associated with death and decay and impurity—they don't belong in space that's *qadosh*, because it's in close proximity to the very author of *life*—we'll explore that more in the next story we're going to look at, briefly—but this is just making the point.

How does Moses feel, again? He's curious and then he's—what? Terrified. So is it good to be invited into the presence of God? Is it good? Yes. [Tim laughs] Can you imagine? It's like looking at the night sky and then—if you believe in God and believe that there's a being whose mind is responsible for architecting all of this, and that being actually wants to be in a relationship with you—that's pretty remarkable. *I would like to go near this being and be around this being.*

But the first time that God's presence is explored, it's in this story, and there's a paradox at the heart of it. God wants to be known and he's inviting Moses to come close to him. But at the same time, it's dangerous to Moses. And so Moses has to *change*, to get into the *qadosh* space—and that's actually what gets played out. And what he's experiencing here is just one small, little microcosm of what his people are going to experience on the whole.

After Moses walks away from this experience, he's commissioned to go confront the powers of evil, and Pharaoh and Egypt, and demand that Pharaoh humble himself before God and let the Israelite slaves go. They eventually do get to go. And then where Israel goes is right *here*, to this place where Moses had *this* encounter.

And then all of the people of Israel, together, have this encounter as God's holy, *qadosh*-presence comes down—and it freaks the people out. And what God does is: he enters into a covenant relationship with these people—Moses and his people. And he says he wants to plant his *qadosh*-presence right in the middle of Israel, and that is all

going to be symbolized and embodied in the form of—what?—in the middle of Israel’s camp? A sacred tent, called “the Tabernacle”—a sacred tent.

And then—if you’re familiar with it, it’s all these elaborate designs—very beautiful—it’s a *qadosh* space. And not just anybody can waltz into the tent. People who have become unique and set apart themselves are the ones who represent Israel—Moses—they can go into the space and, right at the center of it, it’s like “the hotspot” of God’s presence. It’s called the “most holy place,” the most *qadosh* space. And only one special person can go in there, on a specific day of the year—it’s all very *qadosh*, [Tim laughs] right?

And the point isn’t about, just, “God’s uptight,” and he only wants to be with certain kinds of people. It’s the same experience of stargazing. It’s the same experience of, like: “oh my gosh, I’m so small—I’m so frail—I’m so weak before all of this”—and it’s not because the universe is a jerk. It’s because it’s the universe. [Tim laughs] Right? And in the same way, there’s this paradox at the heart of God’s own holiness. His presence is so powerful and beautiful and good, it’s *dangerous*. It’s not either-or—it’s not a “but,” it’s an “and,” of those two together.

And so here’s what Israel is called to do by the holy God—I’m being very brief here, but this is a classic passage where it all comes together: “Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, ‘Say to the people of Israel, “I’m the Lord your God. Make yourselves holy, therefore, and become holy because I’m holy. You shall not make yourselves impure with any of the defiling things that are in the land. For I’m Yahweh—I brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. And so you guys are going to be holy because I’m holy.”’” It’s a lot of *qadosh* in one paragraph there.

So here we’re finally to the connection of our common English use of this word—about being a moral person—a moral, religious person. There are certain behaviors that, if I’m in the presence of the author and the creator of life—the very embodiment of purity and power and beauty and truth and justice and goodness—there are certain ways of living and being a human that are inappropriate, when I’m in proximity, in relationship to this being.

And so this being calls his people to *share* in these divine qualities of beauty and goodness and justice and truth—and that’s why you love to read the book of Leviticus. [Tim laughs] That’s your favorite book of the Bible. So this is how God called ancient Israel to “take off their sandals,” to exist in the *qadosh*-space. And a lot of how he asked Israel to do that, it seems very strange to us. And that’s because it’s from a different time, and a different culture, and a different place.

Israel had this elaborate symbol, cultural symbol-system—anthropologists call it “cultural taboos”—where, based on a core worldview, and set of values that a culture

has, cultures often form behaviors and patterns of avoiding certain kinds of things. And sometimes they're completely irrational, but they speak to those core values.

Just like, it's irrational that you won't eat your dinner in the bathroom, but you will brush your teeth in the bathroom—do you see how irrational that is? But it speaks to this core value that's good: germs—there are bad germs in the world, yes? Will they kill you and make you sick? So do your utmost to not get those things in your body. [Tim laughs] That's what it means. That's why you won't eat your dinner in the bathroom. And it smells bad and it's gross, but are you with me? Like that's a core value, expressed through an irrational behavior.

And so through these commands in Israel—so like, don't touch mold, and then go offer a sacrifice in the temple. And you might think, "Well, what's wrong with mold?" So there's things like: mold, or bodily reproductive fluid, or blood or diseases, skin diseases, or dead bodies—that, if you've come into contact with these things, you're not a sinner—it's not sinful. You are "impure" because you've come into contact with what, in their imagination, is associated with death—symbols of death and decay and mortality.

To have those traces on you, of death and mortality, and then just to waltz into the presence of the author of all life and beauty and truth and goodness—are you with me? *That's* the problem. The problem isn't being impure. The problem is, when you're in an impure state, waltzing into the presence of the one who is *qadosh*. That's the problem.

And so you just don't do it—they wouldn't do that. And you wait seven days—you take a bath—offer sacrifices—and then you're good—like, go back into the *qadosh* presence again. And so this was the way that they embodied this value—like, "we get to host the presence of the Holy One"—and they honor his presence through this way.

Israel was also called to honor the presence through their *moral* purity. And the book of Leviticus is really concerned with the sexual behavior of Israel—with their business practices—with generosity to the poor—and healthy, loving relationships. And this is how Israel sets itself apart from the nations, because they live in proximity to the author of love, and beauty, and relationships, and goodness, and so on. So that's the setup: Israel is supposed to change themselves to live in proximity to the presence of the Holy One.

How do they do as the story goes on? How do they do at this task? They fail. They fail utterly. I just summarized the whole Old Testament for you, [Tim laughs] right? They failed utterly—they didn't do it. And that's why, if you try to read the Old Testament, you're like, "All this blood and sex and political scandals"—human history, we call it. [Tim laughs] Right? And Israel's history is a part of human history, even though they were called to something different.

And so into that complex, dark history of Israel, come these figures called “the prophets.” And the prophets had—typically, were people who had encounters like Moses had. They had some powerful encounters with God’s presence. And then they look out at the people of Israel and they go, “Oh man, we say God lives in our midst, but look at how we live as a people—this is not good.” And so they go stand on the street corner and write scrolls and books to accuse Israel, and warn them, and challenge them, and so on.

So one of these guys—prophet’s name is Isaiah. And he had an experience, much like Moses. And it becomes a commentary on how Israel’s story opens up into the story of Jesus, and the rest of the future of the universe—the future of the universe, in Isaiah 6. Let’s read the story.

“So in the year the King Uzziah died—” Isaiah’s speaking—“I saw the Lord.” Oh, really? [Tim laughs] Wow, that doesn’t happen every day. In fact, I thought that’s supposed to *never* be able to happen, but here, you’re reading it just like I am. So “I saw the Lord high and exalted, seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were *seraphim*, each with six wings—with two covering faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they’re flying.”

Okay, so let’s pause, real quick, here. So when he says, “I saw,” he’s using standard prophet-like language to tell us he’s talking about a vision, or a dream, that he had. Because he’s in a space that he would *never* be allowed to go, in reality. He lived in Jerusalem. He’s having an experience where he’s in—what space? He’s in the equivalent of, like, standing *inside* the burning bush—like he’s sitting on a burning branch, so to speak—he’s in the hotspot.

The temple in Jerusalem: there were gradations of holy space. There’s the courtyard, where everybody can go. Then there’s the building itself, where *only* priests can go. And then there’s a back, cube-shaped room, where only the high priest can go on one day of the year—*qadosh*—super-holy. And so he’s in that space—he’s like—wakes up and he’s in that space—he’s not supposed to be in there.

And then what he sees is what you would see if you were in the temple, but on drugs. [Tim laughs] Right? Because what he’s seeing is all the symbols, and the images, and the iconography that you would see in the temple: bizarre winged creatures that flank, and surround the divine presence.

And then at the hotspot of the holy of holies—it’s the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, right?—it’s the ark of the covenant—and then, with these creatures. So what are these creatures? He calls them seraphim. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, they’re called *cherubim*. We butcher it: [Tim enunciates] cherubim. And they’re not little babies—plump babies with wings—that’s Greek mythology. So these creatures are not human.

They're winged, and they're always multi-form, made-up of multiple animals—sometimes they'll have a human feature, like a face, but it's got a bull's body, and bird's wings, and so on. These are watchers of the divine presence, but they're symbols of the *created* realm—all of the created realm of life—that flanks and surrounds the author and creator of life. And they worshiped in grateful praise. That's what all these symbols are about.

So he's standing there, and he sees the one enthroned who, normally, is invisible—because they weren't supposed to depict God with an image because that's reducing the Holy One into something within the creation. And so—but here he is—he's seeing it. It's the temple on acid [Tim laughs]—is, like, what Isaiah is experiencing right here—it's crazy. And so an altered form of consciousness—sorry, that might have offended some of you—but it's an altered form of consciousness. He's having an ecstatic vision—are you with me?

Okay, so then they were calling to one another, and here's what these beings are screaming out—what are they screaming? [Tim raises voice] *Qadosh, qadosh, qadosh* is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory." So you have these symbolic beings who represent all the created order, and they're screaming out—right?—as the smoke's filling the room—and they're screaming out that God is *qadosh, qadosh, qadosh*. He's the utterly unique one, the one who is wholly "other," and transcendent.

And notice that God's status as *qadosh, qadosh, qadosh* is directly connected to his status as creator—do you see that? "The whole earth is full of his glory." And "glory" is a word that we'll explore later in the series—it means that all creation speaks to God's reputation and significance—creation is this God's handiwork.

How you guys doing? How would you like to be in Isaiah's experiential shoes right now? How would you feel about being in that space? "At the sound of their voices"—excuse me, let's go back—sorry, bottom—"At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook—" the temple's filling with smoke—I'm not liking being here right now —[Tim laughs] I don't want to be there right now, and definitely not after what happens next.

"'Woe to me,' I cried. 'I am *ruined*, for I'm a man of impure lips and I live among a people of impure lips, and my eyes are looking at the King, the Lord Almighty.'" Does he feel great—like God's his buddy that day? [Tim laughs] You know? I thought this was, like, "better is one day in your courts," kind of thing—and that we would all be happy if we could be there. [Laughs] Right? We sing songs about it. And then—but then, like, here's the guy who got to do it and he's absolutely terrified. It's the burning bush moment, and it's not—no curiosity, just abject terror. It's crazy.

And why? It's actually the same feeling that I had stargazing: "I'm small and frail and weak." It's the same experience that we assume Moses had—of why he hid his face, and why he was scared. And now it's: why are frail, morally-broken, selfish humans terrorized by the gift of the divine presence?

"I'm a man of impure lips"—there's something about this contrast. Whatever being is responsible for this stranger-than-Oz universe that we inhabit—whatever mind or being—just the power and the ability to architect and design and imagine where we exist and what's happening here, and that there are such things within that mysterious universe, like love, and beauty, and goodness—to encounter the author of all of that reality in one space, just, is absolutely overwhelming.

And how many "likes" I had on the photo—and, like, the really angry thoughts I had towards that person—and the: how selfish I am [Tim laughs] on a regular basis to my roommates, and my family members, and other friends—like, all of that is, just like, *spotlight* [Tim vocalizes]—and that's no fun. It actually sucks—to have all of your moral compromises *exposed* before the author of the universe—that's the experience that he's having. And God's not his "buddy," in his mind. He's going to be incinerated and destroyed before such power.

But look at what happens—and this is the surprise in the story: "Then one of those creatures"—stay away from me [Tim laughs], right?—"one of those creatures *flew* to me"—[Tim grins] not good—"with a live coal in his hand." So we're in the temple, and—all this is based off of what's inside of the temple—there's an altar of incense, with hot coals, that just burns incense twenty-four-seven.

So this being—alien-like being—gets tongs, and then starts flying towards *you* with tongs, with a hot, burning coal. [Tim laughs] It's coming towards you. [Tim laughs] You get it? This is crazy. I don't know what you're feeling like in this—you know, if you're here, you want to run? It's probably a dream—like, *I can't get away*. It's one of those things where you're trying to run, but you can't run fast enough. There's an alien coming at you with a laser gun, and it's about to incinerate you—that's what's in his mind—*that's it, I'm done for*.

And then what happens? It touches him, and then he's still alive, right? And then he hears—hears what's happened. I can't imagine it felt great—it probably hurt. But what we are told is: what he remembers hearing, which is: "Look, this fire has touched your lips, and your guilt's taken away, and your sin's atoned for." Who saw this coming? I thought if Moses didn't take off his shoes, he'd get blown up or something. And I thought—there's a story or two, in the Old Testament, about people who did waltz into holy presence, and got struck by lightning, or something like that.

But that's not what happens here. There's something about Isaiah's posture in holy space—is that of owning his own moral brokenness, his own failures—he owns it: “I'm a man of unpure lips, and so are all the people I spend my days with.” And all of a sudden, God's holiness—which you thought was dangerous to mortal humans—actually, it becomes intimidating, but then it becomes this fire that purges him. And instead of destroying him, it heals him—it makes him *more* like the Holy One—that's the story.

And this is not a normal way of having your sins “atoned” for—that's another word we're going to talk about in this series. Normally, if you're in the area of the temple, having your sins atoned for, what ritual are you going through, as an Israelite? Animal sacrifice—which is way less painful, I think, than this experience here—this seems way worse. But this is the experience he has. If his sin and impurity is *really* going to be dealt with and healed and transformed, God's holiness is going to have to invade his personal space in a much more radical way. That's the story.

And with this, you realize that the whole story of Israel—you thought this was a story about a God who planted himself in the midst of miserable sinners, and then said, “Okay, everybody shape up and—so you can come be with me forever.” And then when you hit the prophets, you realize like, “Oh my gosh, that's not what the story is at all.”

Like, this is a story about a God who chose a people, and, in their experience of being close to the Holy One, it made the *gap* so clear—between broken, sinful humans and the beauty and purity and power of God. And the long-term plan—the ultimate purposes of this God—is not *this*, however. It's actually of God's space to *come into* other people's space and to overwhelm it with his purity and to restore and redeem and transform people—are you with me? That's what's happening in the story.

And this is where you see God's holiness become a part of God's mission to our world. God's *holiness* is his standard of purity and power and perfection, but it's him bursting out of the holy space, into our world, to come confront us and heal and transform us. And it's exactly that, that brings us to the point where Jesus fits into the story of the Bible. And I could go on a lot longer, or I could show you a video that a friend and I made about it, that'll summarize it all in, like, five minutes—it'll be way more interesting, I think.

And so this is a way of “landing the plane.” I'll come up and prepare us to take the bread and the cup. But I just—this fundamental question of how you think of God: is he waiting for *you* to shape up, to come be holy like him? Or did he—before you even thought to even think about that question—make a decision to move towards *you* in his holiness, so he can heal and transform you? Those are two *totally* different kinds of God, aren't they? Which one do you think Jesus points us to? Let's watch the video.

[video clip from the BibleProject video titled *Holiness* begins (45:54)]

Jon: You've probably heard the word holy before, or at least sang it in a church song once or twice. And for most people, this idea is really just connected to being a morally good person. So God is holy because he is morally perfect.

Tim: Yeah. That is part of it. But in the Bible, the idea of holiness is even bigger and more rich. What it's really describing is how God is the creative force behind the whole universe. He's the one and only being with the power to make a world full of such beauty and life. And so all these abilities, they make God utterly unique, which is the meaning of the word holy.

So a helpful way to think about God's holiness is by using the sun as a metaphor. The sun is unique, at least within our solar system, and it's really powerful. It's the source of all this beautiful life on our planet, and so you could say that the sun is holy. And you can actually take this metaphor even further in that the whole area around the sun is also holy.

Jon: Yeah. Because the closer you get to the sun, the more intense it gets.

Tim: Yeah. Exactly. So that very power and goodness that generates all this life is also dangerous. I mean, the sun, if you get too close, will annihilate you. And in the same way, there's this paradox at the heart of God's own holiness. Because if you're impure, his presence is dangerous to you. And not because it's bad but because it's so good. And so the first time we see this paradox of God's holiness, it's in the story of Moses and the burning bush.

Jon: So God tells Moses to take off his sandals because he's standing on holy ground. And Moses covers his face in fear, and God says, "Hey, don't come any closer." It's intense.

Tim: Actually, it's that intensity of God's holiness that's explored even more in the stories about Israel's temple, which was the main place where God's holy presence was located. And at the center of the temple was this room called the "most holy place." It's the hotspot of God's presence. And whether you're an Israelite living in the land around the temple or a priest working right in the temple, you're in proximity to God's holy presence, which is dangerous.

Jon: Yeah. This is a problem. So how's it supposed to work?

Tim: Well, in the Bible, the solution is that you need to become pure.

Jon: So, like being morally pure.

Tim: Yeah, and that's easy enough to understand. But the Bible spends a lot of time talking about another kind of purity—being ritually pure, which is a state where you separate yourself from anything related to death, like touching things like diseased skin, or dead bodies, or even certain bodily fluids. All these make you impure.

And becoming ritually impure isn't necessarily sinful. What's wrong is waltzing into God's presence when you're in an impure state. And so that's why God gave the Israelites very clear instructions for knowing when they were impure, steps to become pure, so they could go into the temple again.

Jon: So that's what the book of Leviticus is about.

Tim: Right, but it doesn't stop there. This idea keeps developing. So later in the Scriptures, we find this really interesting story by a prophet named Isaiah. And he has this crazy vision where he's in the temple, and he's right in God's presence. He is totally terrified.

Jon: Yeah. He knows the rules. He shouldn't even be in there, and he's worried about being destroyed.

Tim: And then this crazy creature called a seraphim...

Jon: Yeah. That is a crazy creature.

Tim: Totally. So it flies over with a hot coal, and then it sears Isaiah's lips with the coal and says something really weird. "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for."

Jon: So this burning coal somehow makes Isaiah pure.

Tim: Yeah. It's remarkable. Because normally if you touch something impure, it transfers its impurity to you. But now here's this new idea where you have this coal—this very holy and pure object—and it touches Isaiah. And it transfers its purity to him. Isaiah is not destroyed by God's holiness—he's transformed by it. I mean, the implications of this are just huge.

But there's one more development, this time from another prophet, Ezekiel. And he has this vision where he is standing at the temple, and he sees water trickling out from it. And then that water turns into a stream,

and then it grows into a deep river that starts flowing through the desert, leaving this trail of green trees behind it. And then it flows into the Dead Sea, making everything fresh and alive.

Jon: So instead of becoming pure first and then going into the temple, here God's holiness comes out from the temple, making things pure and bringing them to life. What does it all mean?

Tim: We don't know. Until we meet this man Jesus. And he claims that he is fulfilling all of these ancient visions, but in surprising new ways. So Jesus, he went around touching people who are impure—people with skin diseases, a woman with chronic bleeding, or dead people. And when he touches them, their impurity should transfer over to Jesus. But instead, Jesus's purity transfers to them and actually heals their bodies.

Jon: Jesus is like that holy coal in Isaiah's vision.

Tim: Right. And Jesus claimed that he was the human embodiment of God's own holiness and that he and his followers were now God's temple, so that through them God's holy presence would go out into the world and bring life and healing and hope. And so this is why Jesus described his followers as having "streams of living water flowing out of them."

Jon: So this is our part of the story where we find ourselves now, but where's this all heading?

Tim: So the last pages of the Bible end with a final vision about God's holiness, and this time it's by a guy named John. And in his vision, we see the whole world made completely new. The entire earth has become God's temple. And Ezekiel's river is there flowing out of God's presence, immersing all of creation, removing all impurity, and bringing everything back to life.

[video clip from the BibleProject video titled *Holiness* ends (51:50)]

Tim: As we come to take the bread and the cup, we believe that we are together as a community, gathered around the Holy One—that we are meeting together with the one who loved us, and whose holiness came to purify us.

And that happened through the story we're telling with these symbols: through his broken body and shed blood, where Jesus, the Holy One, took into himself all of the impurity and sin and death and decay that we contribute to. And he took it to the grave for us, and on our behalf, so that his holiness, that his life, that his new creative power could be unleashed into the world and into our own lives.

And so this is the question I would just encourage you to ponder and to pray, as we sing and take the bread and the cup: is there a part of your life—if you’re trying to follow Jesus—is there a part of your life where you know you’ve closed it off? There’s a certain way of thinking—there’s a pattern of behaviors—there’s a relationship—there’s some part of your life where you’re “down” to follow Jesus *here*, and let his love and holiness permeate you *here*—but, like, *this* part is off limits.

And you may not even know that it’s like that, until all of a sudden, a moment of Jesus’s holy love confronts you—which is both wonderful and unpleasant. And it allows us a moment, like Isaiah, to own up to our failures—not in a form of self-hatred, but in a form of open honesty. And knowing that the Holy One—whose grandeur and handiwork you can go stare at at night, and whose love meets us in the human person of Jesus—that this Holy One loves you, and wants to be closer to you, and heal you. That’s the one that we come to meet with today.

[EMSB theme fades in]

All right, thanks for listening to “Exploring My Strange Bible” podcast. And hopefully that was helpful for you—it sparks a whole bunch of questions—and gets you thinking bigger and better thoughts than you did, maybe, forty-five minutes ago. So future episodes: we’re going to be tackling key words, like “atonement” and “glory” and “covenant.” This was a really helpful series for me, at least, to bring a whole bunch of reading and reflections together. So onward and upward. Thanks for listening, and we’ll see you next time.

[EMSB theme fades out]