

The Fire of God's Presence

Radical Change

Exodus 3-4; Isaiah 6; Luke 5 :1-11; Acts 9

“We are saved by beholding. The soul is transformed by what it gazes upon. Look long enough at God and you begin to reflect Him. Religion can reform a life, but only an encounter with God can transform a heart.”

A W Tozer

As we turn the pages of Scripture and read about the great heroes of the faith, we can't help but admire them. We read their stories, and something inside us whispers, “I wish my faith looked like that.” Who wouldn't want the faith of Noah, hammering away for decades on an ark while the world mocked him? Who wouldn't want the courage of Abraham—packing up everything he owned, leaving family behind, and walking into an unknown future simply because God said, “Go”? Who wouldn't want to stand like David, a shepherd boy with no armor — just a staff, five smooth stones, and a sling — facing a giant that made an entire army tremble? Who wouldn't want the boldness of Daniel, refusing to bow to a corrupt culture, choosing prayer over safety, and trusting God even when it meant a night in the lions' den? Or the blazing devotion of Stephen, so filled with the Spirit that he proclaimed Christ even while stones rained down upon him?

We admire them.

We quote them.

We preach about them.

But deep down we wonder...

What would it take for our faith to burn like that?

What would it take to move from comfortable Christianity to courageous obedience?

What would it take for God to change us so radically that our lives could never be the same again?

Because these heroes of the faith are shown in Scripture to be ordinary people before God called them, we have great hope. What we admire in them can become what God produces in us. Admiration can grow into imitation... and imitation into transformation. Yet even with the road map of holy living written plainly on the pages of Scripture, we must admit something humbling: many seek change, but few truly find it.

We feel the dissatisfaction.

We sense the spiritual stagnation.

We know we were made for more than crawling — yet we remain stuck.

Why?

Because deep down we understand the cost. Becoming like Christ requires surrender. It requires letting go of control. It requires dying to the old, self-absorbed life we secretly protect. Sin is not just in our actions — it is woven through our memory, our identity, our pride, our fears, and even our comforts. And perhaps our greatest struggle is this quiet, stubborn preoccupation with self. But if we are ever to answer God's call...if we are ever to become the kind of men and women we read about in Scripture... then listening is not enough. We must obey. Radical change does not come from trying harder—it comes from yielding deeper. It is the prayer of surrender that says,

“Lord, break me... and remake me as You see fit.”

In today's message, we will discover that radical change — becoming more like Jesus — does not happen by accident.

It requires reverence.

It requires humility.

It requires trust.

And ultimately, it requires surrender to God's commission on our lives.

Because it is only on holy ground that everything becomes clear. It is there that we learn who God truly is — holy, sovereign, and all-consuming. It is there that we learn who we truly are — frail, dependent, and desperately in need of grace. And it is there that brokenness is transformed into faith...fear into obedience...and self-glorification into servant-hearted mission. For when a person encounters the living God, they never walk away the same. Holy ground always changes you.

Holy Ground Reveals Who God Is

Moses is not searching for a burning bush, and he is certainly not expecting a divine calling. He is simply tending sheep — living an ordinary, quiet life in the far reaches of the wilderness. But on holy ground, God reveals Himself before He ever reveals His plan.

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 came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So, Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 3:1-6

God interrupts Moses' ordinary routine with an extraordinary revelation — fire that burns, yet does not consume. In reverent fear, Moses hides his face. He removes his sandals. And he speaks words that will forever mark his life: "Here am I." The man who once expected to fade into obscurity suddenly finds his life filled with meaning—not because of who he is, but because of who has called him.

If we are to experience radical transformation, we too must heed the call of the Lord — the One by whom all things were created and for whom all things exist (Colossians 1:16). Such change cannot occur while we listen to competing voices or continue bowing to the god of self. God has given us a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26), not so that we might remain friends with this world and become enemies of God (James 4:4), but so that we would seek Him while He may be found (Isaiah 55:6). Radical change does not come from using God to satisfy temporary thirsts. It comes from being drawn into His presence. Listen to the cry of David, a man who understood holy desire:

"One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple."

Psalms 27:4

And when Asaph nearly slipped into the pursuit of earthly wealth and pleasure, his encounter with God led him to this confession:

"Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Psalms 73:25-26

If we are ever to experience radical change, it will not be driven by effort alone, but by hearts that hunger for God — hearts that have discovered the Pearl of great price and the Treasure hidden in the field (Gospel of Matthew 13:44–46) and gladly surrender everything else for the joy of possessing Him.

Holy Ground Reveals Who We Are

Once God reveals His holiness, the next thing He exposes is not our purpose — it is our condition. And nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the vision God gave the prophet Isaiah.

In the year that King Uzziah died, 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 wings 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.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me!” I cried. “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.” Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah 6:1-7

A true vision of God’s holiness exposes the infinite gap between our rags of self-made righteousness and His perfect purity. Isaiah does not respond with confidence or celebration — he responds with collapse. “Woe is me... I am undone.” Standing before a holy God, Isaiah realizes that even the best of human righteousness cannot survive the fire of divine holiness.

Isaiah fully expects judgment. He assumes the fire of God will consume him — that holiness will lash out to cleanse heaven of his unclean presence. After all, creation itself testifies to God’s eternal power and divine nature, leaving humanity without excuse (Romans 1:20). Isaiah realizes his uncleanness—and the uncleanness of his people—when exposed to the blazing holiness of God. But the God who is holy is also the God who is gracious.

Instead of destroying His servant, God purifies him.
Instead of judgment, God provides atonement.

A coal from the altar — God’s own provision — touches Isaiah’s lips, and the Lord declares: “your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

This is the God of holy ground — a God to be feared and revered, yet a God so full of grace that none of us would stand without it.

Holiness humbles us...
but grace restores us.

And only after Isaiah sees who God is, and who he truly is, will he be ready to hear the call.

Holy Ground Restores What Fear Has Broken

When holy ground exposes our brokenness, God does not leave us there — He restores what fear has shattered. And we see this restoration unfold in a simple fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee.

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:1-11

Peter's response is telling. Faced with divine power, he does not celebrate success — he collapses in confession. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." This is what always happens on holy ground: fear exposes what grace intends to heal. Without God's grace, honest self-examination would rightly end in condemnation. But the gospel does not work that way. God does not call the qualified — He qualifies the called.

Jesus does not excuse Peter's sin, nor does He ignore his need for repentance. Grace never minimizes sin — it transforms sinners. As apostle Paul makes unmistakably clear:

What shall we say, then, shall we go on sinning so that grace might increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Romans 6:1-2

Christ was showing that while the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), it is only true when it leads to repentance and holy living. Our weakness found in our sinful nature, then, is not an excuse to not serve a holy God but instead an invitation to allow the fire of His presence to transform us into the calling God has assigned to us!

If only we would truly listen to the One who stood in the synagogue, opened the scroll, and declared good news for weary and broken people like us:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Luke 4:18-19

This is the voice we must hear — not the voice of fear, failure, or self-condemnation, but the voice of the Savior who proclaims freedom. To be holy as He who has called us is holy (First Epistle of Peter 1:15–16) is a calling far beyond human strength. And when we fall short of God's glory — as we all do — it is easy to doubt that those who participate in the divine nature (Second Epistle of Peter 1:4) can truly be changed by sitting at the feet of our Master.

But failure does not cancel calling.

And sin, when met with repentance, does not disqualify us from grace.

When we stumble — and we will — we need not let fear drown out our calling. Instead, we listen again to the voice of Christ who restores fallen disciples and says, “Follow me... feed my sheep.”

The Good Shepherd's yoke is easy and His burden is light (Gospel of Matthew 11:28–30). His commands are not grievous to those who love Him (First Epistle of John 5:1–3). And His will is lived out not by self-effort, but by lives surrendered—living sacrifices, transformed by the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:1–2).

So we stand when we can.
We crawl when we must.
We repent whenever needed.

And we keep moving forward —
not by our strength,
but by the power of Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.

Because holy ground does not demand perfection —
it invites perseverance, repentance, and trust in the grace of Christ.

Holy Ground Redirects Our Purpose

When holy ground restores us, it never sends us back the same way — it redirects our purpose. I can think of no better story than Paul's conversion to illustrate this fundamental truth.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Acts 9:1-19

Saul violently opposed the Son of God. By every human standard, that should have disqualified him forever. Yet Christ had another plan. After three days of blindness, surrender, repentance, and deep humility, this proud Pharisee — a man who had advanced in Judaism beyond many of his peers — bowed before his sovereign King. The persecutor became a servant. The enemy became an ambassador. The destroyer became a builder.

This story rings loud and true: no one is too far gone for repentance and grace to forgive, restore, and redirect. Standing on holy ground, Saul did not merely receive mercy—he received a mission that would define the rest of his life. And the same Christ who stopped him on the road still speaks today:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.” — John 14:6 (KJV)

On holy ground we do not just find forgiveness —
we find direction.
We find purpose.
We find life.

Praise be to God that when we stand on holy ground, we are set free —
not to drift, but to soar,
not for our glory, but for His honor and His name.

Conclusion

Holy and living God,
we confess that You are not common,
You are not familiar,
and You are never tame.

Like Moses, we did not come here today looking for fire—
yet You met us anyway.
You revealed Yourself,
and in Your light we have seen ourselves.

Lord, we acknowledge our need.
We confess our pride, our fear, our divided hearts.
We admit that too often we have admired faith
instead of surrendering to it.
We have listened...
but we have not always obeyed.

So today, on holy ground,
we remove the sandals of self-sufficiency.
We bow before You and say,
“Here am I.”

Cleanse us, O God.
Where our lips have been unclean, purify us.
Where fear has silenced us, restore us.
Where sin has wounded us, heal us by Your grace.

Let the fire of Your presence burn—
not to destroy us,
but to transform us.

Lord Jesus,
You are the One who said, “Fear not.”
You are the One who restores fallen disciples
and calls them forward again.
Do not let our failures define us—
let Your mercy redirect us.

Send us out changed.
Not merely forgiven, but commissioned.
Not merely comforted, but called.
Give us courage to follow You,
strength to obey You,
and hearts that desire nothing more than Your presence.

Make us holy—not by our effort,
but by Your Spirit.
Make us usable—not for our glory,
but for Yours.

And now, Lord,
standing on holy ground,
we offer ourselves to You again.

Break us where needed.
Remake us as You see fit.
And lead us in the way everlasting.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ—
the way, the truth, and the life.

Amen.

Holy ground always brings change—because an encounter with the living God always demands
a response.