

Seraphim

Orders of Angels · Biblical Angels

The seraphim (Hebrew שֶׁרָפִים, seraphim, singular שֶׁרָף, saraph) appear only in Isaiah 6, yet this single passage provides one of Scripture's most sublime glimpses into heavenly worship. The name derives from the Hebrew root שָׂרַף (saraph), meaning 'to burn,' identifying these beings as 'burning ones'—whether referring to their blazing appearance, their burning devotion to God's glory, or their function as agents of purifying fire. Their brief biblical appearance yields profound theological insight into the nature of worship, holiness, and divine transcendence.

Isaiah beheld the seraphim during his prophetic commissioning in the year King Uzziah died (approximately 740 BC). The young prophet entered the temple and received a vision of unprecedented glory: 'I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.' This theophany—a visible manifestation of God's presence—revealed both divine majesty and the prophet's utter unworthiness. The Lord's train (the hem or border of His robe) alone filled the entire temple, suggesting that even this magnificent revelation represented merely the periphery of God's infinite glory.

Note: The seraphim appear only in Isaiah 6; nowhere else in Scripture are they mentioned by name. This uniqueness has sparked debate regarding their relationship to other angelic orders. Some identify them with the cherubim based on functional similarities (both attend God's throne and declare His holiness). Others view them as a distinct order, noting differences: cherubim have four wings (Ezekiel 1), seraphim six; cherubim emphasize God's holiness requiring mediation, seraphim His holiness inspiring worship. The Revelation 4 living creatures combining characteristics of both suggests considerable overlap, or perhaps that distinctions between angelic orders are less rigid than systematic categorization implies.

Above the throne stood the seraphim, each possessing six wings employed in a remarkable distribution of functions: 'with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.' This arrangement reveals the seraphim's posture before divine glory. Two wings covered their faces—even these exalted beings, who dwell perpetually in God's presence, cannot gaze directly upon His unveiled glory. The gesture expresses both reverence and the recognition that God's essence transcends even angelic comprehension. Two wings covered their feet, a gesture of humility and modesty in the divine presence, recognizing their created status before the uncreated One. Only two wings served for flight—their locomotion and service. The majority of their capacity (four of six wings) was devoted to worship and reverence rather than activity.

The seraphim's primary function appears as antiphonal worship, each calling to another: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.' This declaration—known as the Trisagion (Greek for 'thrice-holy')—constitutes the only divine attribute in Scripture repeated three times in immediate succession. Hebrew possesses no superlative grammatical form ('holiest'); instead, repetition intensifies meaning. The threefold repetition represents the ultimate superlative, declaring God's absolute, infinite, incomparable holiness. His holiness doesn't merely exceed all other holiness; it constitutes a category unto itself, utterly transcending created comprehension.

Note: Early church fathers, particularly in the post-Nicene period, interpreted the Trisagion as an implicit Trinitarian revelation—each 'holy' corresponding to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While such retrospective interpretation harmonizes with Trinitarian theology, it likely exceeds Isaiah's immediate understanding. The original emphasis falls on God's consummate holiness rather than His tri-unity. Nevertheless, the NT's application of Isaiah 6 to Christ (John 12:41—'These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him') validates finding deeper Christological and Trinitarian significance in

the passage. The seraphim's worship, understood through progressive revelation, did indeed honor the triune God, though the fullness of Trinitarian doctrine awaited NT disclosure.

The seraphim's proclamation provoked immediate physical effects: 'And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.' The temple's foundations shook at the seraphim's voice—not from volume alone but from the weight of glory attending their declaration. Smoke filled the sanctuary, reminiscent of Sinai's theophany and the cloud filling Solomon's temple at its dedication. This visible manifestation of divine glory emphasized God's holiness as simultaneously glorious and terrifying, attractive yet dangerous to sinful humanity.

Isaiah's response proves instructive: 'Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' Confronted with divine holiness proclaimed by the seraphim, the prophet immediately recognized his utter pollution. Not his actions but his very nature—'I am a man of unclean lips'—disqualified him from God's presence. The seraphim's sinlessness highlighted his sinfulness; their purity exposed his corruption.

What followed demonstrates the seraphim's mediatorial function beyond mere worship: 'Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.' The seraph became the instrument of cleansing, applying the coal—representing purifying judgment and atoning sacrifice—to the prophet's lips. This action symbolized the removal of guilt and the purification necessary for prophetic ministry. The burning ones,

themselves ablaze with holy fire, mediated purification to the defiled.

The seraphim's portrait in Isaiah 6 establishes several crucial theological principles: First, worship centers on God's holiness, not His love or mercy (though these flow from His character). The attribute the seraphim emphasize is holiness—God's utter otherness, His transcendent separation from all creation and sin. Second, even the highest created beings cannot comprehend divine glory fully; they cover their faces, acknowledging creaturely limitations. Third, true worship involves humble self-effacement; the seraphim cover themselves, directing all attention Godward. Fourth, recognition of divine holiness inevitably produces consciousness of personal sin in those exposed to it. Fifth, God provides purification for those He calls, using His servants (even angelic ones) as instruments of cleansing.

The seraphim's burning devotion to declaring God's holiness provides the pattern for all earthly worship. Like them, believers should focus on divine attributes rather than personal preferences, should humble themselves in God's presence rather than presuming familiarity, should declare His glory rather than seeking their own, and should allow exposure to His holiness to reveal and purge their remaining sin. The seraphim, burning with holy fire, point all creation toward the thrice-holy God who alone deserves endless praise.

Key Verses

Isaiah 6:1-2

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

Isaiah 6:3

And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

Isaiah 6:5

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.

Isaiah 6:6-7

Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.

Revelation 4:8

And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

John 12:41

These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him.