

Isaiah 6: God meets, cleanses and sends Isaiah

Judah's Desperate Situation

It was 1914 when Edward, Viscount Grey of Fallodon, wrote famously this: *"The lamps are going out all over Europe; and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."* That's also how it felt for Isaiah and Judah as the glory years under King Uzziah came to an end.

2 Chronicles 26 describes Uzziah as a wise king, one who sought God, and who "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord." Under Uzziah's rule the country had grown powerful and prosperous. He was a great leader, ingenious, successful and whilst he obeyed the Lord everything went well. But as his power grew so did his pride, and thinking of himself as above God's commands, he entered the sanctuary to burn incense, something that only priests were able to do. As a result, the Lord struck him with leprosy and he lived out the rest of his reign alone.

Uzziah's son was regent in his father's place and took over when he died, and although he is described as another good king, the cracks in the kingdom were already beginning to show. Assyria was growing as a regional superpower, threatening Judah and her cities, and once secure Israel looked terribly under threat.

That was the political landscape when Isaiah received his call, but as we've seen over the last few weeks, the situation was only going to get worse. As we've said previously, chapters 1-5 of Isaiah function as an author's preface. Like an overture at the beginning of a symphony, Isaiah has introduced all the themes he will develop more fully across the rest of his book. But amongst the clashes and crescendos of doom and judgment and calls for the people to repent there are also love songs of grace, offers of mercy, and invitations to come and be washed completely clean. The lights may have been going out, but the God wasn't finished with his people yet! In the midst of darkness there was light; in the midst of judgement, grace; and in the midst of disaster, Isaiah speaks of the Branch of the Lord who would one day come to save God's people.

It was at that dark moment in Israel's history that Isaiah was called into God's service, and however bleak things looked, Isaiah was about to be reassured that God was still in charge. The king was dead but the King of Kings was still very much in charge.

Isaiah's Glorious Vision

Perhaps the darkness of the days had driven Isaiah to the temple, or perhaps it was his regular practice. Whatever he was doing there, on this particular day Isaiah saw a vision that would change his life. Verse 1. *"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."*

The scripture tells us that God is spirit, and so can't be seen, but there have been times in history when God has made himself visible in a way that helps us to understand his greatness. And on that day, Isaiah received such a vision: a glorious vision of God in all his glory, high and exalted above all other kings and rulers and powers and seated on a mighty throne surrounded by angels of fire.

Isaiah didn't see everything clearly, but his vision of God was so grand that the Lord's train or the hem of his royal robes filled the whole temple. You've probably heard that verse before, but have you understood the point of it? One commentator explains it like this: *"If just the hem of his garment filled the temple, then how big was the throne? And how big was the one sitting on the throne? In other words, words fail to describe the greatness of God."* The God of Isaiah's vision is vast and mighty!

Isaiah also saw seraphim surrounding the Lord. The word *seraphim* literally means 'burning ones', beings that look like flames of fire, and they cried out *"holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."* These are beings were so awesome that the sound of their voices shook the door posts and thresholds, rather like a low-flying fighter jet buzzing over the top of our house.

Their song was glorious too. "Holy! Holy! Holy!" they sang. In Hebrew repeating the same word turns it from an ordinary noun into a superlative. So, in Hebrew writing 'gold-gold' instead of just 'gold' would be translated as pure gold. But here it is a three-fold holy. And that doesn't just mean 3 times as holy - this is holiness, cubed! God's otherness, his power, might and divine majesty is off the scale; far, far, far beyond anything that we can comprehend.

But seeing all this doesn't cause Isaiah to respond with a "Wow! What an amazing sight! I wish I had my camera!" He responds with "woe", as he is deeply conscious of the impossible gulf, the gulf of sinfulness, between him as a sinful human being and a righteous and holy God.

It's hard to get our heads around that. But imagine turning up to a dinner party wearing smart casual clothes only to find everyone else dressed in luxury designer suits and ballgowns, and however smart you felt you were before you'd suddenly feel terribly underdressed. Multiply that a thousand-fold, that's what Isaiah felt.

"Woe to me," he cried, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among the people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Why does Isaiah mention his lips and not his heart? Perhaps because he knew that the same lips that praised God in the temple have also been used to curse, slander, grumble and gossip against people God had made. Perhaps because he knew that it is what comes out of us that shows what we are really like on the inside, however well we try to hide it. Either way, he knew that he was standing bare before God and there was nothing he could do to hide the depth of his sin.

I wonder if you have ever felt the true depth of your sinfulness? It's easy to compare ourselves to other people, criminals, murderers, paedophiles, or even just our neighbours, and think that compared to them we are pretty good; not perfect but really not that bad! It's easy to imagine that we are even doing God a favour by being interested in him and turning up to church once a week. How foolish! How deluded! How far off the mark we are!

Isaiah was one of the best men of his generation. His family and friends would have thought of him as faithful, upright, honest, godly even. But when he came face-to-face with God he realised just how far short of God's perfect standards he had fallen. He was a beggar dressed in filthy rags at a royal banquet, wretched, weak, helpless, guilty; a man of unclean lips who, by the sound of things, hadn't realised until that moment just how far both he and his fellow Jews had fallen from true worship and righteous living. So when Isaiah saw God in all his holiness he knew that he was in terrible trouble. He knew that, like King Uzziah, he deserved to be cast aside and thrown out of God's presence, and yet that is not what happened is it. Isaiah's cry of shame and repentance didn't lead to condemnation, it drew from God an expression of grace and mercy.

God's Gracious Mercy

Verse 6: "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.""

The coal from the altar, perhaps a chunk of charred lamb from the sacrifice, is placed onto Isaiah's lips. But instead of setting him alight it sets him free. His guilt is taken away. He is cleansed and forgiven and made right with God again.

I hope you can see that there is nothing in this passage that even hints that Isaiah has deserved or earned this forgiveness. Forgiveness is an act of a gracious and merciful God; a free gift to all who recognise the vast gulf between them and God and repent. But notice too that a sacrifice was needed. Throughout the Old Testament lambs were slain as sacrifices of atonement to deal with the people's sin, and these sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus' ultimate sacrifice. That is what is being prefigured here. It's because of

the cross, because of Jesus' sacrificial death as our substitute, that Isaiah can be made clean. And in the same way you and I can also be forgiven, no matter how sinful we might be.

Having grown up in a mostly Christian home I think it's fair to say that the list of sins I'd committed by the time I became a Christian at the age of about eight or nine was not vast. But even so, I still needed God's forgiveness. I still was a wretched sinner, even though I didn't feel like it.

Sadly, since I've done many things of which I am terribly ashamed and at one point in my life I turned my back on a clear call from the Lord to serve him, and I ran away like Jonah. For a number of months I felt fine, having the time of my life, but soon I began to wrestle with guilt, not sleeping well, snapping at my friends, running further and further away from God. I knew what I had done and I began to feel the horrible weight of my sin.

But one night soon after that Easter the Lord met me, drew me to repent, dealt with my guilt and washed me clean. And that night I had such a joy and a peace that I cannot explain. It was like I had lost eight stone of weight and I was floating as I walked along the path back to the chalet. At that point, more than any other in my life, I understood something of the seriousness of my sin and how glorious the forgiveness of God truly is, and I was more grateful for Jesus than I had ever been before.

That's what Isaiah was feeling when the Lord spoke for the first time in this passage in verse 8 and asked *"whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"* Isaiah is on cloud 9: he's been forgiven, saved, cleansed, redeemed, so you can almost picture him jumping up and down with his hand in the air saying "Pick me! Pick me! I'll go! Here I am! Send me!"

Isaiah is so overwhelmed by God's love and mercy and grace that he eagerly volunteered before he heard what the job entailed. And given what the task involved, perhaps that's just as well.

Isaiah's Difficult Call

"The Lord said, "go and tell this people: "be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

"You want to be a messenger Isaiah? Fantastic, I'm thrilled! But let me warn you that almost no one will listen to you. They may hear the words but they won't make sense to them. And if they do understand what you mean they won't believe for a moment that it applies to them! So instead of stirring people to turn back to God, your preaching, Isaiah, is simply going to harden people's hearts so that they are unable to repent. That's your mission Isaiah. How do you feel about it now?"

That's a tough ask isn't it. To carry out a task, a long task, taking years of your life, that will not only end in failure but it will appear to actually make the situation worse.

Imagine being a lifeguard on Bondi Beach, tasked with raising the warning signal for sharks, but every time you sound the warning signal people pay no attention. In fact, the more you raise the alarm, the more they run into the sea! That wouldn't be much of a job would it? It wouldn't give you much satisfaction. Yet that's what Isaiah was being asked to do.

And it's not that Isaiah's message would be incomprehensible, or that he didn't have the skills to communicate clearly. In chapter 28 Isaiah explains that he used such simple words that the people of his time wanted to send him back to teach pre-school children. No, it wasn't that the message was complicated, or that his words were too difficult to understand, it was because the people had turned their backs on God and as the people chose to reject God again and again their hearts became harder still. And so rather than bringing life and turning the people back to God, the effect of Isaiah's ministry would be to drive people further away. Every time they heard and rejected the words of Isaiah, they would make it harder for themselves to repent later on.

It's interesting that these are the most quoted verses from Isaiah in the New Testament. Time and time again the apostles use these verses to explain how hard it is for people to hear and accept the gospel of Jesus. And I have to say I know how they feel. Countless couples have heard the gospel through marriage prep and baptism classes; dozens have gone through exploring Christianity courses or been part of the church for a while, and yet so few, so very few, have turned sincerely to God and received the forgiveness Jesus died to win them. Friends, that is the heart-breaking, energy-sapping reality of life in full-time Christian ministry. And if you've been faithful in witnessing to friends and family you will know exactly how I feel and how Isaiah felt.

So, it's no wonder that in verse 11 Isaiah asks *"for how long, Lord?"* *'How long do I have to keep giving your message whilst people ignore it? How long will it be before they finally do understand? 1 year? 2 Years? 5? 10? Will God's people turn back before it is too late?'*

God's answer is that however much Isaiah preaches it will never be enough. The hearts of the people were now so hard, so calloused, that God's just judgement, when it came, would be severe. The first wave might leave just 10% behind but even that 10th will again be laid waste. Cities would be destroyed, the people taken into exile, the countryside abandoned, farms and land ravaged. What was coming on God's people looked nothing less than complete destruction.

God's Wonderful Promise

Except that because of God's grace and mercy it wouldn't be complete destruction; there would be a remnant left behind. Like tree stumps can start to sprout again after a vast fire has destroyed a forest, so God's people would not be utterly wiped out. These stumps, like holy seeds, would spring forth again. After judgement would come new life, and as we follow the trajectory of the Old Testament we see how that it is from one of these stumps, the stump of the tribe of Jesse, that Jesus, the one who would bring new life to the world would finally come.

Friends, with God there is always is grace in the midst of judgment; undeserved mercy in the midst of wrath; and resurrection life in the face of death. Despite the repeated unfaithfulness of his people, God would keep his wonderful promises and have a people of his own drawn from every tribe and tongue across the world.

Well, I must close. But I want to do so with...

A Cross-Centred Challenge

Jesus calls us to follow him as Lord and saviour, but how we respond will depend almost entirely on how we view God, our sin, our salvation and our eternal hope.

So how do we see God? Is he just a little greater than the angels, or have we grasped something of the magnificence, the majesty and the holiness of God that sets him as far apart from us as the east is from the west?

How do we see our sin? Do we see ourselves as basically nice people who have an unfortunate tendency to mess up, or can we see that compared to the holiness and perfection of God we are all proud, arrogant, self-centred, perverse, cruel and violent rebels in whom the stain of sin and sinfulness goes down to the last atom in the last molecule of our bodies?

How seriously do we take the warnings in the Scriptures for those who do not repent and come to Christ? I'm sure we would risk our lives for those whom we love if their lives were in physical danger, but are we so sure of the reality of the Day of Judgment that we are prepared to risk their ridicule, or their distancing of themselves from us, to tell them about Jesus and their need of a Saviour?

And how much are we really looking forward to the glories of Heaven and the new creation? Are our greatest treasures laid up with Christ in God, or are the things we really care about, the things we really value, the things we would fight to hold on to, all here on earth?

You see, if we have a weak view of God then we will live as we like and God's Word will have little effect on us. If we have a weak view of sin then we will not be grateful for Jesus' sacrifice of himself upon the cross in our place and we will have no motivation to serve him. If we have a weak view of the consequences of sin then we won't feel the need to tell anyone about Jesus because we won't see that they are in danger. And if we have a weak understanding of our inheritance in Christ, of what awaits us in heaven, then we will not be prepared to risk or sacrifice anything for the gospel and we will find ourselves running a thousand miles from the kind of call Isaiah received.

Friends, please let us heed the warning here of developing a hard heart, of thinking that this message is for everyone else and not us, or thinking that right now is just too inconvenient to take up our cross and follow where Jesus leads because if we ignore his call we risk hardening our hearts to the next time and the next time and one day we will be too hard and it will be too late.

But today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to reach out and receive God's forgiveness and unceasing love! Today is the day to take up our cross afresh and follow him! Today is the day to start witnessing to our friends and neighbours! Not tomorrow, not the week after, not when we've got our lives sorted, not when we've finished our exams, not when we've secured that promotion or retired but now. Now.

For our sakes Jesus endured the cross and grave and rose again, and through faith in him we are ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven and set for glory. So will we go gladly wherever he sends us? Will we serve willingly in whatever way that may be? Will we give sacrificially towards the work of his kingdom and will we pray unceasingly for the lost to find Jesus? And if we are nervous and unsure, will we truly commit ourselves to seeking God and understanding all that he has done for us so that we will finally be able to say yes when he calls us to go?

Isaiah knew just how much he had been forgiven and how much grace he had been shown, so when God asked he said: "Here am I! I'll go! Send me!" May we all respond with such gratitude and joy and may we all serve God as faithfully as he.