

Isaiah 6: The Preparation of God's Messenger

OUTLINE

Meeting with God
Experiencing His grace
Preparing for rejection

INTRODUCTION

The task to bring God's word to a culture that does not want to hear it is a difficult one, but God prepares His servants to bear witness. We come today to look at the famous vision of Isaiah 6:1-13 which in fact constitutes Isaiah's call to the ministry. You would expect to find it at the beginning of the book, but instead we have the terrible spiritual state of Israel outlined in Isaiah 1-5, and then we see how God meets with Isaiah to prepare him for the hard task that lies ahead of him. Isaiah has put it out of order to draw our attention to it. Isaiah begins with God calling the heavens and the earth as witness against Israel's sins, v4 summarizes it well, 'Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.' Despite their religion, He calls them Sodom and Gomorrah 1:10. They are a people who have prostituted themselves with other gods and religions, 2:6-8, 'For you have rejected your people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of things from the east and of fortune-tellers like the Philistines, and they strike hands with the children of foreigners. Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.' Because they had forsaken God they sinned against their neighbor, 1:21-23, 'How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.' Throughout the first 5 chapters God promises judgement and then restoration, e.g. 1:24-26, 'Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." Isaiah has the job of bringing a very hard message to Israel. He has to tell them that they are a stench to a holy God. That for all their religion and external righteousness they are rotten to the core. He has to tell them that judgement is coming. He has to call them to repentance. He has to warn of what they would think impossible that enemies would be allowed by God to come in and utterly devastate Israel.

Now we cannot copy and paste Isaiah and Israel's situation into the modern world in which we live. We are not Israel; we are Post-Christian and do not have a pretense of public religion, but the prevalence of sin in society, the unwillingness to see their sin, and the disbelief in a holy God who will judge are common human problems. On top of that we are also called to preach in this context of the possibility of forgiveness for those who repentance and the certainty of judgement upon those who do not. How do you prepare your

servant to go and preach in such a difficult situation? Isaiah has his famous vision where he encounters a holy God and His grace as a necessary preparation to bear witness to a sinful world. As we look at this section we have three headings. Meeting with God; experiencing His grace; and preparing for rejection.

Meeting with God

V1, 'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.' Before we go to a hostile world, we must first come to know a holy God. Isaiah, a Jew, a husband and a father, someone who might have worked in the palace and had ties to the royal family is confronted with a vision of God. It is the year of Uzziah's death. He was the self-willed king who tried to offer incense before God and was struck with leprosy. He had to retire from public life and Jotham would have ruled on his behalf. When questions might have been asked, who is the true king of Israel, Uzziah or Jotham, Isaiah meets the true King. We know from John 1:18, that no one has ever seen God. Isaiah is not seeing God as only the Son and the Spirit can behold Him, but in a vision. He has a vision of God's heavenly courtroom, the heavenly temple. There is a throne, He is seated as a king upon it, this throne is lifted high, and the train of His robe fills the temple. Uzziah was a failed King who had no right to be in the temple, God is the only King who has the right. Uzziah was unclean, God is holy. Here is Isaiah standing in the temple in the presence of God like Uzziah, I wonder if thoughts of leprosy and unworthiness were connecting in his mind.

Incidentally, Isaiah 6:10, part of this vision, is quoted by John in 12:39-40, and clearly states that Isaiah was beholding Jesus in his vision, 'Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.' John is telling us that Isaiah's theophany was in fact a Christophany. As Isaiah encounters God in this vision it is clear, that God is the rightful King and ruler; that He is above all and worthy of praise.

V2, 'Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.' We come now to the seraphim, these are some kind of angels, but there is not any agreement on what they are. The singular word seraph translates as fiery serpent; and Isaiah is the only one to use the word in the plural referring to these angelic beings. I would utter a word of caution here, these are visions, they are not exact descriptions. We find other descriptions of the angelic beings around the throne which are different, we must be very careful to over exegete them for info on the angels. They are a foil against which we see the glory of God we must not get distracted by them.

We see they have six wings, 2 cover their faces. This is part of what we have to take note of as these angels beholding God in His manifest glory, a glory filled with judging intent is too much for these sinless creatures to look upon. We know that sinners cannot look upon the Lord in His holy wrath, but we see that these sinless creatures who are made to inhabit the throneroom are overwhelmed. We see in their response what descriptions of God's glory cannot convey. With two they fly, as with other visions we see a heaping up of mixed images where they are both standing as opposed to God's seated repose, yet also flying. This possibly illustrates their attention and readiness to execute God's will. And with two they cover their feet. This reference to 'feet' may be a

polite way of referring to genitals. The picture is one of hiding anything that could possibly cause offense in the presence of God.

V3, 'And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" How do angels describe God to each other? This is what Isaiah gets to hear. It is not only sinners who are taken with God's holiness, the angels are provoked to acknowledge in absolute fervency the holiness of God. This is emphasized by repetition. It has been noted that the only attribute of God to be repeated three times is His holiness, here and Revelation 4:8. The very holy of holies is laid bare and the voices of the angels who are there are shouting, signaling in their body language and repeating the overwhelming truth of God's holiness.

What is the holiness of God? Most would think that it means God is really pure. And this is part of it, but the holiness of God means much more. 'Geerhardus Vos explained how holiness encompasses ontological supremacy and moral purity: 'The root QDSH originally means, 'to set apart,' 'to be separated.' God is therefore called 'the Holy One,' because He exists in Himself and nothing can be compared to Him. The metaphysical gap that exists between Him and the creature is therefore expressed by the concept of holiness.' Since God is absolutely supreme, 'in His dealings with His creatures He claims everything for Himself and makes it subservient to His purposes.' Therefore, Vos said, we may also describe God's holiness 'as that attribute of God by which He seeks and loves Himself as the highest good and demands as reasonable goodness from the creature to be consecrated to Him.'¹ All of what He is as the sum of all good, who defines good by His existence sets Him apart from us and puts a demand upon us to conform ourselves to Him, in His goodness and His will. Holiness in God is both an incommunicable attribute as it is a description of His Godness; and a communicable attribute where we are under obligation to take all that we are as image bearers who have been given a small capacity to reflect His moral purity and to give ourselves, consecrate ourselves to the task of being holy as He is holy. What does this mean for us? For the angels who are sinless, although they are morally pure, even they will still feel the incredible chasm between what they are and what God is, and all their creatureliness will cry out in recognition of God as God. And even though they have no need to fear for their own sins, beholding God in His holy wrath against sin is so terrible that even they hide their faces and the experience forces them to cry out in recognition of His holiness. Imagine then what this means for us as sinful human beings. We are creatures, but worse we are sinners. If the angels have to cover their eyes and cry out, what must our response be?

But there is more Isaiah is informed by the angels that God is YHWH of hosts. Israel was a small and overlooked military power in the region. At this stage it was caught between Egypt and Assyria. But God is in YHWH of hosts, hosts here most likely refers to armies, the heavenly hosts of thousands of thousands of angels, if not over all the armies of the earth as well. And more than that His glory fills or will fill the whole earth. This could be a statement stating the obvious, that general revelation declares the power and godhead of God; or it could be a prophecy foretelling the surety of God's universal glory that Israel has glimpsed in the past, and Isaiah sees now, covering all of creation. This holy God who cannot look upon evil with approval is irresistible in might and whose glory will finally fill all things in a final revelation and reckoning.

¹ Beeke, Vol 1, p568.

V4, 'And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.' The angelic shout must have sounded something like what Paul describes, 1 Thess. 4:16, 'For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.' And added to this noise is the appearance of smoke just like when God took residence on Sinai to give the 10 Commandments while warning the people not to approach, Ex. 19:16-18.

Experiencing His grace

I remember being in the charismatic church and regularly crying out, 'God come down'; 'God show us your glory'; 'God reveal yourself to us.' And what I was looking for was a westerners affirmation that the supernatural was real and to have a unique experience. Isaiah experienced the presence of God and it nearly killed him. V5, 'And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" He does not rejoice, He is not excited or entertained, he is utterly devastated. He does not feel warm and fuzzy and safe, but exposed, and dirty and damned. The first 5 chapters concern themselves with pronouncing woes upon sinful Israel, Isaiah feels this concerning himself, the first prophetic pronouncement he makes is against himself 'woe is me.' Seeing who God is, Isaiah now sees himself and his people more clearly. He is a contradiction to the holiness of God, this is not something small that can be overlooked but provokes judgement; this is not something that he can see any way to mending he is lost. Being a servant of God does not mean joining a club of mean people who focus on the faults of others and pretend to be holier than thou. No, it is a personal encounter with a holy God and to know how sinful and lost we are, how worthy we are of judgement.

Isaiah was a religious man, and probably a good man but all his goodness is nothing but smoke burned away in the glaring heat of God's holy glory. It has always been of interest to me that Isaiah speaks of himself as a man of unclean lips. Unclean reminds us of Uzziah the leper who was not worthy of being in the temple. But why lips? Well, the angels have sung in truth; they have declared the truth of God's being, worth and power to one another, and in a way honoring of that truth, that the appropriate amount of fervor, and volume, and deference. The mouth reveals the heart, but Israel is a people set apart to call upon the name of the Lord, to declare the worthiness of God, to honor His name and not take it in vain. I think this reference reveals how they have been playing at religion and worship, how they have insulted instead of honoring God with their hypocritical religion. His name is on their lips but their hearts are far from Him. O how the worship of God's people fails to honor and revere Him!

'For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' We think we know who God is, but it is He who has to reveal Himself to us. We are so small and so sinful. We underestimate and undervalue Him. We talk of His glory, but we know nothing. Isaiah sees God. He is the King. His throne is at the center of the universe and suddenly the terribly selfish way we have lived and not oriented our whole being and universe to the overwhelming reality of God becomes apparent. His tremendous power becomes obvious that none can resist Him, yet all the while we have lived as rebels. His judgement is irresistible, there are none who can joke it away; shout it away; shame God into not judging with accusations.

Every mouth will be stopped in recognition of His glory when our eyes see Him on that last day.

But then Isaiah who has been confronted with the godness of God, His holiness, power and authority, who has been lost in the reality of his sinful unworthiness before Him, is suddenly confronted with the grace of God. V6-7, 'Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." The altar of incense has no coals, but the altar where guilt offerings for sin were made did. The angel brings a coal, supposedly doused in the blood of a sin offering and touches Isaiah's mouth, the place of his felt sin, to cleanse him. And takes the very instrument used for sin, his lips, and will put them into his employ. Isaiah is confounded by two rollercoaster realities in God. He is holy, and He is gracious. The one spells his judgement the other his salvation. I always think about what this must have felt like. When the angel grabbed a coal, too hot for him to handle so he uses tongs, and brings it over to Isaiah. How intimidated he must have felt, no fully understanding all that was happening. Then there was the moment he had to surrender his lips to be touched, did he cringe, did it hurt, was there smoke and the sound of sizzling and the smell of burning lips? Was there an accompanying sensation of cleansing and cathartic release. The burning of Isaiah's lips, the tool of his sin is a fitting picture of true repentance where those who see their sins and mourn them, and put them to death as they turn from them and seek forgiveness for them. We kill a little part of ourselves in repentance and it is painful and delivering at the same time as we cut away that part of ourselves that was killing us.

Then there is the pronouncement, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.' Let me make one thing clear. Do not go home and try to cleanse your sins by turning on the stove top and pressing your face against it, this does not remove the guilt of sins. This is a symbolic act happening in a vision not reality. It symbolizes the blood of the sacrifice given and now applied to Isaiah's sins. It is here that we must think of Jesus Christ and His blood that has been shed for the remission of our sins. All other sacrifices were merely tokens and IOUs that stood in the gap until Christ came and fully and finally paid for the forgiveness of all our sins. If you want to be forgiven, it is much simpler than kissing hot coals. Like Isaiah, recognize the holiness of God and your sin before Him; and then see His grace as He willingly gives Christ for you to die on the cross in payment for your sins. You do not have to kiss hot coals but the Son for forgiveness. The bible says that all those who place their trust in Christ, and not their own good deeds, who come to God for mercy on account of what Christ has done will be fully forgiven. Our guilt we are told is taken away, it is taken away by being put upon Christ who then went to the cross and paid for them. Our sins are atoned for, that means paid for. Isaiah did not see all that we see but he did get to see more. He was given Isaiah 53:4-6, 'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' As Isaiah thought about the cost of forgiveness and the blood that was on the coal that cleansed him, I wonder if he realized that the sacrifice of Christ covered even his sins. Isaiah experiences the lowest of the low and the highest of the highs as his sins are removed. It would have been

with first-hand knowledge that he would be able to share Is. 54:4, ““Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth...” And 1:18, ““Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

Preparing for rejection

Now the prophet is ready to be sent on a mission to a sinful and difficult people, v8, ‘And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” He is not champing at the bit to tell people off, but to talk about the God He has encountered who is more holy and more gracious than anyone has realized. God’s judgement is more tangible and His forgiveness more possible. And if God can remove the sins of Isaiah who does not deserve it, then God can do it for anyone. But God has a difficult mission for Isaiah, his ministry is one of judgement where the word of God will be used to save a remnant but harden the rest, v9-10, ‘And he said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

We are sent to an unbelieving world, where God uses His word to harden some and save others. We like Isaiah have been confronted with God. He is holy and in the light of this we have sin our sin and condemnation. But then we see the grace of God who provides atonement for sin. We need a view of God that will enable us to be a believer in a sea of unbelief; to convincingly preach the truth when none want to believe it; to preach with compassion to a people who are worthy of judgement; and to persevere with the hard hearted because God is willing to save. May God use this sight of His glory to enthuse you to be a witness in a difficult world.