

ISA 6:4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.
[5] Then I said,
"Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

ISA 6:6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. [7] And he touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."

Woe Is Me!

Isaiah 6:4-5

"Woe to them" (Isaiah 3:9). "Woe to the wicked" (3:11). "Woe to you" (5:8). "Woe to those" (5:11, 18, 20, 21, 22). There have been eight "woes" pronounced upon others by the prophet in the first five chapters of this book. I'm afraid that too many of us move past this little word far too quickly when we come up against it in our bible reading. "Woe" as a noun is "deep distress or misery that comes from grief (www.dictionary.com)." To experience woe is to experience wretchedness and unhappiness. When the word is used as an interjection, it becomes a curse.

This is easily seen in its usage by Jude, the brother of James. In his short little book he makes the statement, "Woe to those who speak rail at things they do not understand. They have taken the way of Cain, they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error, they have been destroyed in Korah's rebellion" (Jude 1:10-11). It is clear from the references to Cain, Balaam, and Korah that Jude's "woe" is a pronouncement of damnation upon certain men who ignorantly claim to speak for God. Isaiah's woes in his book are no less woes of doom and destruction upon the nation of Israel and her leaders.

Obviously, this prophet and many other writers of Holy Scripture pronounce woes upon people. The word is used 100 times in the bible. Societies, individuals, institutions, religious zealots, and all the inhabitants of the earth are among those included in such woes. It is interesting that of all the words in the bible, the only two ever used three times in a row are found separated by only a couple of words here in Isaiah 6. Holy is the first. Woe is the last. You will recall the words of the Revelator as he wrote down the saying of the angel, "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth!" (Rev 8:13). Three woes like this is woe to the maximum, to the 'nth degree.

There is a delicate balance that must always be maintained by the preacher or teacher of God's word. How can he be faithful to pronounce woe according to Scripture while still maintaining mercy and kindness and gentleness in the process? Surely, ours is an age (like every age) that demands woe to be pronounced upon it. I read just this past week that in our friends to the north of the United States have crossed over a line that the prophets constantly denounce in their songs and poems. I quote Albert Mohler,

On April 28, the Canadian Senate passed bill C-250 by a vote of 59 to 11. In passing this legislation, the Canadian Parliament added "sexual orientation" to the nation's laws criminalizing "hate speech." The end result is that the Bible may now be considered a form of criminalized hate literature and Christians who teach that homosexuality is sinful may face criminal charges... **When free speech is denied and the preachers are told what they can and cannot say, religious liberty is effectively dead.**

You think we can afford our continual slumber in this country, that Christians can afford not to get involved in politics and law, that we are safe from such immoral laws in America, that our constitution protects us? I pray to God that no one within sound of my voice is so naïve as this. There is a desperate need in our hour for Christians to leave their little Christian bubbles and once again seek to make a real and vital difference outside of our own communities. Otherwise, the woe that has happened to Canada will be here soon.

Unfortunately, it is not just our pagan societies that deserve woe, it is those who call themselves God's people. This past Tuesday I got the unofficial **tour of sadness** from a friend of mine who lives in south Denver. Where he lives, church buildings stand like ancient monuments on virtually every corner block. If a particular church still happens to be faithful to its tradition of say 50 or 100 years ago, it usually has about 5-20 people in attendance, usually in buildings that would seat 400. However, if the original church has gone the way of the dodo bird only to be replaced by something Postmodern and "culturally relevant," it thrives with literally hundreds or thousands of people. As we drove along, my friend would tell me about some strange thing that this church is doing, or some new fad that *that* church is trying. The one that struck me most was a former United Methodist building – its name still enshrined for all to see, that is now filled with some bizarre cult that calls itself Christian. They of course talk about Jesus, though not as God and they will gladly **baptize your pet** for you. Such are the times we are living in.

This is all so troubling because one can actually see changes in the American church from *week to week*. What was once a stable institution that a person could count on to bring the reading of God's word, some sort of biblical teaching, some semblance of biblically based songs, some sense of transcendence, some length and depth to corporate prayer, some sort of family stability, and a basic continuance of the sacraments or ordinances has become a crumbling building, shifting sand, a long continual earthquake, and an ever changing chameleon. You can no longer count on even these most basic things to be performed in a Christian church service. From week to week more and more churches are abandoning that which actually makes them a church. Woe to a nation that turns her back upon truth. Woe to a people who substitute darkness for light and bitter for sweet.

(Parenthesis)

There is an increasing part of me that gets frustrated at having to say these things week after week. I guess I know how the prophets must have felt. Perhaps you can consider this as your required Christian news report for the week. Brothers and sisters, it is clear to me that we are living in unprecedented times and we cannot afford to keep our heads in the sand about what is going on all around us. We must be speaking against the sort of gross sin that is contaminating God's churches like the black plague. God's people cannot afford to be silent, especially when the text so obviously points us to consider these things. There is a direct correlation between what the church is doing and the fact that our nation is heading into a moral abyss. **This is the lesson** we learned from the State church in Germany during the 1930's and the rise to power of Adolf Hitler. We must learn to discern our times, and then seek to provide the solution which is only found in Jesus Christ.

Here is the lesson of **Isaiah 6** and his great woe. It is important for each of us to recognize our own tendencies. It is a sad commentary on our people when they actually make fun of a church that would talk about hell or dare to preach through a prophet. **"Those old geezers are so negative, so unhappy, and so irrelevant to my own pursuit of pleasure."** This seems to be the unspoken assumption. So there is a great tendency of many to downplay anything negative, anything judgmental, anything that talks about sin. I think to a large degree that this is one thing that makes our church service so strange to some visitors. They are just not used to doing what churches used to do, because few are doing it anymore. Let us continue to stand where so many are falling. Woe to those who will not speak up for God.

But there is another tendency that we must be aware of. I think that if you don't fall into the first camp, that it is likely you will fall into this one. It is a tendency toward a certain kind of sin from those of us who want to be truthful about our culture and the church. For this group of people, often times truth speaking can degenerate into a bashing and crushing anything and everything that you or I do not personally agree with. Our truth becomes God's truth. I think especially of Christian liberty issues. Some Christians can get very uncomfortable with the biblical idea that not everything in the Scripture is a salvation issue. It gets even more uncomfortable when we consider the very difficult concept taught in Romans 14 that the very

same activity that really is a sin for one person really isn't a sin for another person (Rom 14:23). Christian liberty just doesn't fit very well into a black and white view of the world.

If the tendency of people who live by their feelings is to push all doctrine, including essential doctrine, to the background, then the tendency of people who seek truth is often times to push non-essential doctrine to the forefront so that the most bizarre things become one person's personal test of whether or not another person is really a Christian.

John Frame who teaches at Reformed Theological Seminary has an interesting article out this month titled "*Machen's Warrior Children*."¹ J. Gresham Machen left Princeton Seminary in the 1920's to found Westminster Seminary because the leftist, liberal leanings of the former school had so totally destroyed the gospel of Jesus Christ that it could no longer be called Christian. Frame argues that after the defeat of liberalism (a clear essential that had to be fought against), the spiritual children of Machen no longer had anyone else to battle, so they began to devour each other. These issues were not over the nature of Christ, how a person is saved, or whether or not we evolved from monkeys. Instead, entire denominations were created over such massively salvific issues as whether or not someone can have a beer and still be a Christian, whether or not there is one proper way to preach a text, or whether or not the days of creation were 24 hours. In many ways I fear that Frame's conclusions (and I do not agree with him on some very significant issues) are far too often a sad truth that many of us are not willing to accept.

Believe me when I tell you that this discussion on personal tendencies has a very direct purpose in our study of Isaiah 6. It is the fact that both of these sorts of thinking continue to abound so greatly in God's church that becomes a major reason why we are in such great need of Isaiah's vision in chapter 6. We have to be able to find ways of making this text be about you and I. I'm fairly confident that each of us can relate to one of the two tendencies listed above. I want to make this personal to us, so that we will not leave thinking that this woe is for someone else.

Last week we looked at the terribly important topic of the holiness of God. **This week we are looking at its necessarily corollary: our own depravity.** The consequence to a human being who stands in the presence of a holy God is woe. Not woe to another. Not woe to a nation. Not woe to goofy evangelical churches. Not woe to liberal mainline denominations. Not woe to the Democrats or woe to the Republicans. Isaiah says, "woe is me, for I am ruined" (Isaiah 6:5). Do you hear it? Woe to ME, friends. Woe to *me*. If a Christian cannot internalize his own woe, then he is no better than a Pharisee.

I want you to hear this important concept: To the extent that we do not understand the holiness of God, this is the extent that we really think ourselves to be pretty good people, that we don't have tendencies like those discussed a minute ago. And to the extent that we think we are basically pretty good people with perhaps only a couple of things to confess each week, this is the extent that you and I do not know God. Each week we have a time of **silent confession**. Is your own time filled up with confession of sin after sin, or do you more often sit there silently wondering why we have to go through with such a meaningless ritual? Do you have problems telling your God how you have failed him this past week, day, even hour? Or do you sometimes find yourself wishing we had even more time for such an activity because you can't possibly get it all taken care of so quickly? Do you confess your sins each day at home by your bed, in your car, or during your lunch? Or do you find that a couple of minutes each week in church pretty much takes care of your need to repent of your sin?

How you answer these questions tells you perhaps more than anything else you could ask just how well it is that you know God and yourself. People of Reformed theological bent believe in

¹ <http://www.christiancounterculture.com/40615/machen.html>

something called "total depravity." I believe we do so for some very good reasons. Listen to these many indictments of humanity by God.

Start in the most famous of Gardens. Somehow, a man who had known no sin, who was created upright, who was blameless, who walked in fellowship and harmony with the LORD, who owned everything on earth but one small insignificant tree managed (from all accounts extremely quickly) to bring sin and death into this world because it seems that having even one thing be off limits to a man is enough to drive him mad with covetousness. Men are just not good, not basically good, not kind of good. They are horrible wicked creatures. Before the cross event, there is no *better* person for us to talk about than Adam when discussing this topic. The fact that a spiritually living person could sin such a horrible sin ought to be food for the thought of a Christian.

We see in the first chapters of the bible how things got so bad so quickly. Eventually, God destroyed the entire world in a flood. Why? He tells us why. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). This is the uniform view that God has of man after the flood as well. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps 51:5). "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). "The hearts of men are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live" (Ecc 9:3). "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). "We have all become like one who is unclean (legally impure), and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted rags (woman's menstrual cloth). We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isa 64:6). "There is no man who does not sin" (II Chron 6:36). "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (Ecc 7:20).

The New Testament of course gives the same pronouncement. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8,10). "We all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says he is a perfect man... but no human being can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:2). "From within, out the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness" (Mark 7:21-22). I'm not sure about you, but I get the impression from reading the Bible that God does not think we are very good people.

But you may be someone who says, "I'm a Christian. This is no longer true about me." Brothers/sisters, is not 1 John written *for the Christian*? Perhaps you do not go to the extent of saying we never sin, but rather think that you do still do sin – just not very often. Friend, if this is you, then I beg of you to go back and read Isaiah 6.

Consider Isaiah, the man of God, God's prophet, God's spokesman, God's servant. What other man was as holy and righteous as this man in his day? Was not Isaiah saved by God's grace through faith in the coming of the very messiah he talks over and over about? Does this not point out that he was like you and I? If there was ever a man who could stand in God's holy presence, it was this man.

But what did Isaiah do in the presence of such Powerful Otherness, such Penetrating Purity? When God comes to him, this same Isaiah, who was so quick (and right) to pronounce woe upon the people, can now *only* think of himself. Isaiah is not an Evangelical or a Roman Catholic who measures his own goodness by the standard of other men. Isaiah could have measured himself against *any* man and come out head and shoulders above the next righteous man alive, yet he knew he still fell infinitely short of the goodness that he needs to stand in God's presence. Do you see why it is that you must get a glimpse of how holy God is now? If you have even one hope of understanding woe, you must also understand holiness.

Isaiah knows in the presence of God that he can only measure himself as worthy in so much as he is comparable to the Blinding Light who sits enthroned in front of his own eyes. And Isaiah is not worthy. He is not morally close to God. He is not worthy to sit next to this God in the temple. He is not even *in* the same temple as God. He is not in the same city as God, or nation, or world or universe as *this* God. This God is holy. He is *perfectly* perfect. He is absolutely awesome. He is so morally different and pure from the best that man has to offer that Isaiah is left with but one option.

Isaiah's woe is pronounced upon himself. Isaiah curses himself, as another righteous man did so many centuries before. You remember Job. He was "blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil" (Job 1:1). There was no man like him. Yet in the light of God's testing of him, "Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, 'Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' 'May that day be darkness; Let not God above care for it, Nor light shine on it'" (Job 3:1-4).

Isaiah says "woe is me, for I am ruined." Isaiah is *undone*. Isaiah is *unravelling*. He cannot stand. He falls over from the "sickening force that his character is not, any more than his people's, in keeping with God's character."² Isaiah realizes that he is the same as the very people he has been denouncing. "I have unclean lips. They have unclean lips. We are the same." Fellow Christians, have any of us ever comprehended about ourselves what Isaiah comprehends about himself here? I do not think we have. We have not seen God's holiness as he saw it and so we have not seen our own moral unworthiness as Isaiah saw his own. We have not seen the blackness of our own hearts as he did. Yet, (this is important) we can read about it here. And because God's word is living and powerful to accomplish its purposes, we can trust that he will increasingly show us both his own holiness and our own woe through his word. When you read about Isaiah's vision, God can apply it to you in just as real of a way as if you had this vision yourself. This is the power of the Holy Spirit when he applies his truth to your heart. So listen and hear and understand.

In our own rush to hide our sins, to exalt those sins that we do not partake in as somehow worse than the ones we actually commit, to even ignore and laugh off the things that we do, we need to flee to Isaiah's vision: to God's holiness and our own depravity this morning.

Perhaps we need in our time - more than anything except to understand God's holiness - perhaps we need to pronounce woe *upon ourselves*. We need as the day we were to converted to see who we *really* are in comparison with who God is. Do you know what this will do to your own life? It will make you a much more pleasant person to be around, because suddenly you will not be so quick to compare yourself with the person sitting next to you who bothers you so much, who sins to often against you. You will be much less likely to be quick to judge God's servant, because you are so fearful that he is going to judge you too. You will find yourself suddenly gaining patience and kindness and tolerance of things that irritate you so much about your spouse or your children or your parents. You will be much less quick to sin in the tiny ways for you will begin to see that the tiny sins are just as wicked as the "big" sins. If you and I really do know who God is, then we will also begin to understand ourselves. We will see that we are truly undone, each of us before a holy God.

I know that some of you continue may continue to think more highly of yourself even after this long discussion, because you really are convinced that these things are not true of a Christian. You think of depravity as being for the unbeliever. Even the life of Isaiah won't convince you because that was "Old Testament." This is why the life of the disciple who Jesus loved is so important for you to know. When John saw Jesus Christ in his glory (the NT parallel to Isaiah), his New Testament, long since saved, Christian and sanctified self did the following. John says very clearly, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead" (Revelation 1:17). John had His

² Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 183.

vision as an old, old man. He was Jesus' favourite disciple. He was the pastor of the church at Ephesus. He wrote 5 of the books of the NT. How do you get anymore pure and good and cleansed than this man? And still he wanted to die because he recognized who he was in the presence of Christ's holiness, the same Christ who he walked with for three years while he was on this earth. Do you see now how important Isaiah 6 is to your own life?

Let us think about what Isaiah confessed. his confession is rather striking in light of what we have said. Isaiah confesses that he is undone and he then proceeds to give the reason for it. Isaiah is ruined "because..." Isaiah is not undone because he is finite and God is infinite. The problem is not with his nature as a human being. Isaiah is an image bearer and he knows it. Instead, Isaiah realizes that his problem is moral and ethical, even as we have been saying. "Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." The realization of this is made clear again as he says, "For my eyes have seen the King (Jesus Christ), the LORD of hosts."

Think about what he points to about himself. Isaiah does not say that his hands are unclean. This was what Pilate apparently sought to make sure that people did not think of him. Isaiah does not say that the world is unclean and that it is polluting him. He does not say that he learned sin because someone else taught it to him. He knows that he is born this way, not raised this way.

In pointing to his lips, Isaiah points directly at his own heart. Jesus said that **the people honoured him with their lips (Matt 15:8)**. Isaiah says that his lips cannot fool God. His lips are unclean, ceremonially impure, legally damning. No matter what he says that seems good to another man, God knows his heart is wicked. Paul quotes the Psalm with a most striking image of this. "The poison of vipers is on their lips" (Rom 3:13). This is how Isaiah saw himself. His lips seek to kill and poison whatever his mouth can get those lips upon. It is as James said, "out of the same mouth come praise and cursing" (James 3:10), and "the tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body" (James 3:6). It is as Jesus said, "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" (Mark 15:11). Doing good things with your hands cannot make your heart clean. Our problem is systemic and internal, that this is what make us so horrible.

What is the solution to this great problem we have talked about here? Earlier we talked about going into this world to give them the solution. If even Christians continue to sin, can we even say that there is a solution? The Bible gives us a resounding yes. **But I want to look at this answer in terms of what is by now becoming so familiar to many of you: the already/not yet.**

If you even as a Christian are willing to say woe is me, then you are now ready to hear again this most glorious solution. The answer begins where it began for Isaiah. Isaiah's vision included a host of beings who flew around the throne of God singing "holy, holy, holy." These are the fiery, perhaps serpent like seraphim, brilliantly illuminated angels of great power and purity. And so we read, "One of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven'" (Isa 6:6-7).

Here we have in a very pure and distilled form, the holy gospel of the holy God. This is such an important text that we will spend a week looking at just this section of Isaiah 6. For now, let us notice this one thing. Notice how this gospel is God's doing, not man's. What was Isaiah's response to God's holiness? It was to die. Isaiah was not walking an aisle and saying a prayer, because God was not calling him forward to an anxious bench. Isaiah was not seeking out for God and his mercy at this time, because he was too busy digging his face into the dirt.

You see, when a person truly begins to understand God, they begin to understand themselves. When you see how truly unworthy and wicked you are, the last thing in your mind is to insist that God has to be merciful to you. You aren't asking questions about why God is so unfair in

not saving everyone. And the last thing from your mind is to wonder how you might be able to use your freewill to come into his presence. I really do think that the freewill epidemic in our culture begins because we are so busy exalting ourselves because we are so busy looking in the opposite direction of the king who is thrice holy enthroned above, shaking the temple with his voice.

Instead of puffing yourself up thinking your little prayer is your good offering to God, you are thinking about how you can possibly escape the presence of this Holy One of Israel. **When you realize that you can't escape him, that you should be turned into ash your own wickedness because your lips are so unclean, then you are ready for the angel to come to you.** Your readiness is not a matter of standing around holding out your hand, waiting for the angel to come to you. Rather, it is a complete surprise. You are fallen on the floor as dead. Your hands are not extended outward, but are holding your own body as tight as it can in protection from the one you stand close to. You are so caught up in your own depravity, that when God decides to have mercy upon you, you can think of nothing to say. You merely sit there passively receiving what he decides to give you.

When this angel of infernos took a fiery coal off of the altar, I wonder what Isaiah would have been thinking? Maybe he was thinking about Nadab and Abihu who brought strange incense into the tabernacle and never came out again. Perhaps he was worried that this angel was going to incinerate him there on the spot. God surely would have been justified in doing such a thing.

But something very different happens. The angel heads straight for Isaiah's most unclean part: his lips. He singes the lips of the prophet, the most important part of a person who is called to SPEAK the word to another person, burning them with a hot coal. God reaches down to a sinful man who could do nothing about his own uncleanness, and he makes that very spot clean. Isaiah did nothing. God did everything.

The angel then says, **"This has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven."** These are insanely comforting words. So unexpected. So powerful. So life changing. You ask what hope is there for a dying person, a dying church, a dying culture? It is the Angel's coal of fire. This is our only hope. We can only hope to be clean if God makes us clean. If God touches our lips, then we will be clean. We will not be made perfect – yet. But our iniquity will be taken away, our sin forgiven.

This is what thrice woeful people need in the presence of a thrice holy God. The burning coal of the seraphim is something that exists here and now for anyone who has ears to hear. It is not a coincidence that John the Baptist told his disciples that he baptized with water, but one would come who would **baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.**

How does Christ baptize a person with fire? It is only as you by faith and through God's grace trust that the hellish fire of God's wrath that Jesus suffered on the cross was undertaken as punishment for your own sin. If you find yourself desiring such a thing, believe that it is possible for you. If you are overwhelmed with grief after this sermon, understand that you do not have to stay in grief and despair. There is hope and peace that is found in Jesus Christ. When a person's sin is taken away and their iniquity forgiven, then they may be sure that the ultimate judgement of God will not fall upon them. They may be confident that God loves them, cares for them, and allows them to stand in his presence. This hope we offer to the world. This hope I offer to you. This message of forgiveness is truly offered to all who hear it. It is not a fake message and it is not a deceptive message. It is real. God is pleased to save people through it. May God be pleased in the hearing of his word to all allow you to believe anew or for the first time upon his Son this morning, to believe that his work is for you and that you may be found worthy to stand in God's presence on the judgement day, because you are found hidden in God's beloved and only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.