

## The Prophet's Call

### Isaiah 6

A prophet. Who was he? What was his task? The prophet was the man who spoke for God to the people. He was the opposite of the priest. The priest is the man who speaks to God on behalf of the people. Obviously, when dealing with a holy God, it is no small matter to make sure whether you are a prophet or a priest that you are holy too. Of course, no man is holy in and of himself. He needs something from God in order to be made this way. The priest was given the many ceremonial rituals to perform on behalf of both himself and his people. The bloody sacrifices and washings in the law were given to the Levites so that their sins might be covered and passed over by a holy God. The last thing a sinner needs is for the Divine God to meet with a person while his sin remains undealt with.

The stage of redemptive history that the priest found himself in meant that he had to perform these rituals day after day. Hebrews tells us, "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Heb 10:11). Though the sins of the people and the priest were not actually taken away at this time, still the rituals worked because they each anticipated the cleansing work of Christ as He would shed his blood once for all at the cross for the sins of his people.

So what about the prophet? How would the prophet be cleansed? Well, as a Jew, it appears that he would have to have a priest offer up sacrifices on his behalf as well, so that God might cover his sins too. Yet, the vision that Isaiah has of God in his temple seems to speak of a need for something more personal than the blood of bulls and goats.

Let's reconsider why Isaiah is given his vision of God. As God's spokesman, Isaiah was to tell the nation of Israel of her impending doom; doom that would not be averted. The situation in the nation was horrible. Most of the priests were no longer acting as priests. Isaiah tells us, "Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions" (Isa 28:7). Jeremiah tells us, "The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who deal with the law did not know me" (Jer 2:8). Micah goes further and condemns each of the leaders of the nation. "Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money" (Mic 3:11). We have seen as much from the leaders and the common people in the first five chapters of Isaiah's book.

#### **Confrontation (6:1-4)**

Let me now begin to unfold the development of chapter 6 for you. We will look at the entire chapter this morning. 8 "c" words will help us to consider the flow of the passage. First, there is a **Confrontation**. This word describes well what we should actually expect would have happened to Isaiah. His vision, coming in the middle of the book rather than the beginning, really ought not to surprise anyone. If the prophet speaks for God, it is not unheard of for him to have some very direct encounters with God. The stunning things about this vision are unprecedented. Isaiah, who is not a priest, is allowed to enter the temple! Why does he not die? Why does God allow him in? Next, he sees is the very face of God. Why does he not die? Why is he allowed to live? He does not die because he is not seeing the Father

directly, but is rather looking upon the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. As John has said, "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him" (Jn 12:41).

Isaiah is confronted with the Lord (*adonai*) who is seated on a throne. He is now having a meeting in the king's chamber. You remember how Esther reacted when told that she must enter the king's chamber in order to save her own people? She was terrified, even though she was his wife, because the king has the power to kill her on the spot. Though prophets regularly entertained the king in his chamber, this had to have been different, for this king in front of Isaiah is not *just* a man. This king is God; and he is high and exalted and just the tail end of his robe filled the entire temple!

The confrontation does not end here. Besides the fact that he might have expected to die for three different things so far, Isaiah is now given a glimpse of a being that perhaps no one appears to have seen before or since (we do not know because this is the only time they are called seraphs in the bible). They are **fiery, burning angels** who are so glorious that they may not be seen by Isaiah, yet who are still so morally different from God that they may not look upon God's face! Are these the creatures that God has sent to destroy Isaiah? No! He continues to live. More than this, he gets to hear the sound that so many of us desire in this life: The choir of angels singing to God in heaven. And they sing "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD (Yahweh) Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:2).

The confrontation ends in **verse 4**. The terrifying nature of the image must have left Isaiah in a completely ruined state, for at the sound of the voices of the angels, the doorposts and the thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. Maybe we don't want to hear angels singing this side of heaven after all? Just the sound of their voice is enough to send the entire temple into a state of disrepair.

Isaiah was in need of this confrontation for this simple reason. **A prophet who must speak against the crimes of high treason against God had better make plenty sure that he is not going to get puffed up with himself in the process.** How easy it is to decry and bemoan the wicked hearts of others, all while pride begins to well up inside of our own. This vision happens, in part, so that Isaiah will not get puffed up with pride thinking himself better than the nation he is condemning. The extent of Israel's sin and the lengths that God was going to go through to punish the nation meant that the prophet was in need of a very special confrontation with the Lord.

### **Confession (6:5)**

What do you suppose Isaiah's reaction would have been upon seeing such things? I didn't ask what is his reaction, I asked what do you think his reaction would have been. Imagine you have never heard this tale before. Do you think that Isaiah would have begun to sing along with the seraphs his own song? Is this such a strange question for us to ask in light of our own day? Do you suppose that Isaiah would have been brave (or reckless) enough to sing something like we hear in Protestant churches today? Perhaps the song, "I want to know You. I want to hear Your voice. I want to know You more. I want to touch You. I want to see Your face" were the words on his lips?

No, Isaiah was not getting ready to sing, especially something as naively dangerous as most CCM songs. Rather, Isaiah was left virtually speechless. This was his reaction and it was perfectly reasonable. I can't help but think of Job when I read this text. How many chapters had Job and his friends prattled on about what was happening to him? They all had plenty of speeches to give on the matter. But when

Job actually saw God (albeit only in the form of a storm), what was his response? It's basically the opposite of the song we have just read. "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6).

So **CONFESSION** is the second "c" of this text. Isaiah cries out, "Woe to me! 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" (Isa 6:5). Isaiah is like Job. Both men saw God; one in a storm, one in the form of the preincarnate Christ. Both men want to die after the experience. I continue to be struck by how in our day just about the last thing we want to do or hear about in our churches (in our churches!), is our need to repent and confess our sins. **This single fact shows me that the American church is in the same position as the church in Isaiah's day.** For it was their own lack of repentance and confession of sin that led to Isaiah's vision in the first place. Someone had to be confronted by God in that day. Someone had to confess sin in that day. Will you thank Him today that there are still places in our land that take such things seriously and that he has not yet abandoned us completely? Will you once again take it upon yourself to look into the mirror of your own heart, to see its utter blackness, to see yourself in relation to the perfect law of God, and to see your failings to perform it perfectly? Will you be one with Isaiah, considering God's holiness and your own ruined state apart from Christ today? God knows we need men and women who will not be afraid to prostrate themselves before him to that he might lift them up.

#### **Cleansing (6:6-7)**

Thus, we have just moved into the third "c" of Isaiah 6 without realizing it. It is the "c" of **cleansing**. There is a very specific order to this text, one that you must not fail to understand. **Cleansing comes, but only after the confrontation with God and in turn confession of sin to him.**

But when cleansing comes, what a wonder it is to behold. Cleansing is the good news of the new covenant. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols" (Eze 36:25). It is a wonder, and yet it can be greatly uncomfortable too. I really think we miss the boat when we think of forgiveness and grace as being free in every sense of the word. Grace is free in the sense that you do not earn it, you do not deserve it, you do not will for it, you do not pay for it. God bestows it upon whomever he pleases, for this is his right – for this is the God of **Isaiah 6:1**.

Isaiah rightly would have thought that at any moment God would be finished with him. But because of his character as a merciful and tender-hearted Being, God had grace upon Isaiah, his chosen one. God sends one of the seraphs to fly over to the pitiful prophet, to touch his lips (the very part that Isaiah himself had pronounced as unclean) with a hot, live coal. Have you ever stuck a blazing stone onto your mouth? My guess is that it probably wouldn't feel like licking from a cool steam of water. How it must have hurt. This is why I said that grace must not be viewed as in every sense being "free." It does not free us from the pain of our physical bodies – at least not until we die. It does not free us from suffering in this life, but rather grace instills in us the power to endure suffering because we now follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus who suffered an unbearably painful death for us. Grace does not in fact cost us nothing, but rather costs us everything. Jesus said, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

It is high time for Christians to abandon this pervasive **easy believism**. Scripture knows nothing of a person who walks and aisle, says a prayer, and then goes his own way ever ending up being saved. John couldn't get any clearer about this. "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him" (1 John 3:6). We must return (as we will see from the rest of this passage) to the biblical model that a Christian is saved only if they persevere to the end, not getting lost on endless rabbit trails that lead to destruction along the way. **Sanctification is not an option**. Yet, (because it is not an option but is part of the process of being saved) we may still trust that God will lose none of his sheep. The Christian can be confident in this life that God will preserve them in faith to the end.

This cleansing of Isaiah demands a little more of our attention. As we said at the beginning, this is quite a different cleansing from anything the priest ever underwent. After touching the prophets mouth, the angel says, "see, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Now then, Calvin rightly points out that we are **not seeing here the conversion of Isaiah**. We are already five chapters into this book. Isaiah was not an unsaved Balaam for five chapters.

Rather, what we see here is that "it was because the Lord intended to enlarge and extend his favor towards [Isaiah], and to raise him to a higher dignity, that he might have greater influence over the people; and this was rendered necessary by the by the character of the times, and the change which had taken place in the nation" (Calvin).<sup>1</sup> This little piece of information shows us how important it is that we continue to repent throughout our lives, even as Martin Luther pointed out in his very first thesis that he nailed to the Wittenburg door. "The whole life of the Christian is to be a life of repentance."

What is striking here is that this cleansing does not merely cover Isaiah's sin, it takes it away. This is quite stunning in light of Hebrews where it says, "But now [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). Thus, there is something being pictured for us here in the burning, the fire, the coal, the tongs, the fiery being, the touching of the lips that prefigures Christ's atonement. The verse itself says that your sin is "atoned for." Somehow, this event was a propitiatory sacrifice, the wrath of God was taken away from Isaiah. Because there is a dilemma here about how this OT saint could have his sin taken away, I will quote Calvin again because he is so good. "There is no reason to believe that the coal possessed any virtue, as superstitious persons imagine that in the magical arts there is some hidden power." "God alone is the Author of forgiveness, and the seraph is but His messenger, flying to do His bidding."<sup>2</sup>

The stone is a *ritzpah*. This was a stone upon which the incense was placed and burned in the tabernacle, and so it seems that the vision reflects upon the altar of incense rather than that of burnt offering. The strange fire (incense) offered by Nadab and Abihu – where they are burned to ash for their adding to God's word – comes to mind when considering Isaiah's vision. Somehow this whole scene must prefigure the death of Christ because he is the only true propitiation for sins, though exactly how remains to my mind a mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Young, *Isaiah book I*, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

The entire vision speaks harshly against easy believism. And so we must continue to press forward in this text. We want to see the ramifications of the gospel for the prophet. Yet, imagine one more thing here. **What if the seraph had said nothing to Isaiah after burning his mouth?** Isaiah wouldn't have any idea what had just happened to him other than that this terrifying being had just burnt his lips with a hot coal. Such is the dire importance of the preached word in quickening the mind to the faith and life that has been given to it by God's Spirit when we calls us to himself.

### **Challenged and Called (6:8a)**

After the cleansing, God has more in store for Isaiah. The Prophet is now **challenged** and **called** (the fourth "c's"). God did not forgive the prophet and give him this incredible vision so that he might then go and live in the wilderness by himself alone forever. Instead, God does this all so that the Isaiah will be enabled for the terrifying task that has been assigned for him to do in eternity past. Isaiah was elected to preach a message to a nation. But Isaiah doesn't realize how bad it would get for him, again, until the word goes forth a second time. God begins, **"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"**

The plural "us" is the same as is used of God in **Genesis 1**, **"Let US make man in our image."** Now, there is only one God. The LORD makes this plain in the *Shema* (**Deut 6:4**): **"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."** Yet, God is also a plurality. He is an "us." How can God be one and yet many? I have a suggestion. Why do not each of us go ask God that question together when we see him in heaven. Though we cannot fully comprehend, we can still speak without contradiction. God is one in his being. God is three in his persons. There are three persons in the Godhead, even as we have argued before the "holy, holy, holy" represents the threefold nature of God's personhood.

### **Commitment (6:8b)**

**"Who will go for us?"** The voice of God speaks and who is going to answer? It is interesting that the seraphim do not answer the call. Instead, it is Isaiah who answers God. We must say that God has *effectually* called Isaiah, even as Jesus effectually called Lazarus out of the grave. What else could he do but come out? When God calls a person in this way, they cannot help but answer.

Here then is our fifth "c": Isaiah's **Commitment**. Again the order of all this is desperately important. This commitment must be understood as coming only *after* the first four "c's." Isaiah answered back by saying **"Here am I, send me."** This wonderful verse is actually an antidote to two bad, but far too common, theologies. The first theology says that a man answers God's call, but he may choose not to if he so desires. Isaiah might or might not have made this commitment. He could or could not have made this commitment. This is the theology of Arminianism; of freewill.

Those who think such things have simply not taken the necessary time to understand what has happened to this man in the heavenly temple. Isaiah really doesn't have a choice here, does he? I mean, I suppose he could (logically) say **"I won't go."** But why would he? He has just had at least four things that should have killed him pardoned. He has had occasion to see God on his throne. Who else can say this? He has been lifted up into heavenly realities. He has tasted of Jesus Christ, seen a foreshadowing of his appearing, lived with angels, been forgiven of his sins – all without asking for any of it. How could this man dare presume upon God's grace by refusing the call? He can't. It is not that he won't. It is that he really can't. The

vision and message actually make this an impossibility. That is its purpose. His *only* response *must* be "here am I, send me."

You must not think that when God asks this question that the LORD seriously does not know what Isaiah is going to answer. This is not a test, but a *challenge*. That is, God is doing exactly what it takes to ensure the outcome of his plan to send the prophet back to the nation. God is not playing dice here. He isn't gambling with the future. He isn't considering having to find another prophet because this one might say 'no.' This is God we are talking about. He is all knowing of all things, including the future. Just as surely as you cannot choose to fly with your arms, Isaiah cannot say no to God. Yet, here is the thing. Isaiah isn't coerced here. Rather, he is wooed, effectually called, enticed, persuaded *before* the challenge is ever put forward by the entire experience of the vision. Isaiah *will* return to the people with renewed vision and confidence in his message.

So then, just as surely as this is not a commitment of freewill, so too it must be seen as a *real* commitment. This is the error of so called "hyper-calvinism." Isaiah is not forced to do anything here that he does not *want* to do. It is *Isaiah* who responds to God. God is not responding to himself. Isaiah is not God. There is a creator/creature distinction here that must not be lost sight of. The tendency to deny human working, human action, human volition is the tendency to deny our very humanity and even history itself. Man is an image bearer. God has a will and he gave mankind one too.

It is as Paul plainly tells us in **1 Cor 7:37**, there is "a man who [can] settle [a] matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will." Nevertheless, a man's will is not free from God's electing providence, from the person's own nature, or from external circumstances such as culture, physics etc. Nevertheless again, it is truly Isaiah's will that makes this commitment.

### **Commission (6:9-10)**

It is rather ironic that anyone would think that this is an act of freewill (the power of contrary choice). Do you think that Isaiah had any idea what his commitment was getting him into? Of course not. So we come now to Isaiah's **commission** (sixth "c"). The nature of this commission is once more proof that Isaiah did not make this choice all by himself. For if he had, he surely would have gone back on his word once he was to see what his promise would mean.

There is a message that many Christians in our day think God wants them to tell people. We have all heard it before. "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." As the cartoon cleverly makes the point, I wonder what the people in Noah's day would have thought if he had put that as a bumper sticker on his boat just before the rains started to fall? Scripture does not tell us any such thing. **It tells us to treat each other with love, including and especially our enemies. It tells us to proclaim to everyone we know that Christ has died for sinners and that a person may live if they will trust in him by faith alone.** It doesn't tell us who is able and who is not able to respond. It tells us that God has a general love even for the reprobate, for he gives them good gifts here and now. But it does not tell us anything about God having a saving, eternal love for all people. Otherwise, all people would be saved, for God is all-powerful and can do whatever he pleases with the people's of the earth.

Does not Isaiah's commission say as much? Here is what Isaiah was told to go back and say to the nation of Judah. "God 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" (Isa 6:9-10). Imagine that!

Jesus once told a parable about a farmer who went about scattering seed along the ground. (Incidentally, this very parable proves that man has the responsibility to tell people about the kingdom of God). As the story goes, the seed falls on all sorts of ground. Some ground produces nothing at all. Other ground produces only weeds. Other ground grows the seed, but only for a short while and then it dies. Still more ground produces a great harvest and is very useful.

Jesus then goes to Isaiah 6, this very text, to explain why he speaks to people in parables. Jesus Christ's own mission on this earth was to tell people truth in such a way so that they would not in fact understand it. He hid the truth from the masses through parables, but explained it to the disciples (though even they didn't get it until it was revealed to them by the Father and Holy Spirit.)

Isaiah's task is similar, though he speaks clearly and not in riddles. He is told that he is actually being sent by God with the purpose of making sure that Israel *does not repent* [CONTENT FOR NEXT WEEK]. You see, the word of God is not just given to people to turn them to God. It has a double purpose, depending upon the soil (the person) it falls upon. As hard as this may be for some of you to accept, sometimes God sends his word in order to create further damnation for a person (This is partly true even of common grace, though this does not mean that God's grace is not still gracious). But, it is important to understand what this means. As Calvin said again, "Such blinding and hardening influence does not arise out of the nature of the word [or the gifts] but is accidental, and must be ascribed to the depravity of man. The ungodly have no right to object to the preaching of the Truth [or the other gifts of God] as though the proclamation of that Truth in itself brought evil effects. The evil effect come not from the Word, but from the heart of man, which stands in desperate need of regeneration."<sup>3</sup> God's gifts are still good, even if they are being sent to harden a person. Just as the sun melts wax but hardens clay, so also the word melts one person's heart but makes another heart calloused. This poor, miserable prophet is being sent with the express purpose of ensuring that doom will come upon this people. The time for repentance has passed for the nation. The day of the Lord is at hand [fodder for next week].

### **Consternation (6:11)**

A man does not have the right to tell God that this is unfair. "Shall what is made say to him to made it, 'why have you made me like this?'" Isaiah knows full well how true this is, especially after this vision. He doesn't cry out "That's not fair" but "How long, O Lord?" This seventh "c" is the **consternation** that must have been felt by Isaiah after hearing about what the next 50 plus years of his life would be about. I can't image the turmoil that he must have been feeling over the announcement of his message. He must have had great anxiety and also a great deal of sadness over what was to befall his own beloved people, those chosen to be God's holy nation out of all the people's of the earth.

### **Contemplation (6:12-13)**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 260.

Finally, notice how God responds to Isaiah's question. These are really quite sad words. God doesn't say, "for about 2 weeks, then it will all get better." He doesn't say, "Isaiah preach until they repent which will be shortly." He doesn't say, "Isaiah, I'll just forgive them and let bygones be bygones" No, no no! He says, Isaiah, you are to preach "until the cities lie ruined (the same state that Isaiah had found himself in earlier) and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken."

These are not words of soothing, but of sobriety and of our final "c": **great contemplation**. These are words that we should all ponder long and hard in our own day. Contemplate this vision today. Notice the order and the process of it all. The **confrontation**, the **confession**, the **cleansing**, the **challenge**, the **commitment**, the **commission**, the **consternation**, and the **contemplation**. May God have mercy in our day upon our nation. Let us pray to the end of the salvation of our land, our people, our families. We live in a great time of outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. We will look next week at more detail of these last verses of Isaiah 6 in this regard.

But let us not give up thinking about this event. If Isaiah couldn't stop thinking about it – contemplating it – I hardly doubt that we should either. The text ends on a strange note. God is not going to utterly forsake this land as he did Babylon in later years. **He will leave a tenth**. Surely this remnant theme gives us further pause for contemplation. Why a tenth? Why not most or none? It seems that even the destruction of the land of Israel ultimately fulfills the laws that the nation had forsaken. From the tithe that belongs to the Lord (represented in the tenth of the people that he will have mercy upon) to the land that is going to get it Sabbath rests in the future years of captivity, to the houses that were only rented by the nation from their owner the Lord but which will now be destroyed, God is going to make sure that in this destruction he will have his justice. It is the very justice he foretold to them so many years earlier in the law – the book of the covenant. God's law will be upheld, if not by the people, then by God himself.

A tenth will remain but, "it will again be laid waste, but as the terebirth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land." So ends the vision on one last item of contemplation. The holy seed, the stump of the land, the oak and terebirth trees? All have been discussed in redemptive history prior to this. All will be prophesized by this man later in this book. The tenth will stay, but eventually even they will perish. **Yet, even they will leave their stump**. After the trees have fallen, a root will spring forth. This seed is Jesse's seed, Jesse's stump. This seed is a person. He is the eternal king, the same one who sits enthroned on high whose train fills the temple. The stump will rise forth to become a great and mighty oak. His roots will land on both sides of the river of life. The nation will once again rise like phoenix from the ashes, this time to fill the entire earth. It will not be a nation made up of Jews only, but of Gentiles too. And they will be ruled forever by the King of kings and Lord of lords. Contemplation of this great text will never end for you if you do not want it to, nor should it. It is rich beyond all riches. As much as you seek to plumb its depths, it will that much more show you how endless its meaning and life really are. From God's holiness to man's sin to God's providence and his decrees to his plan to send his only Son into this world to die for sinners, this vision is beyond scope and power. May God grant us ears to hear and eyes to see that he did not give to the nation of Israel. May he have mercy on us today.

