

“The Call of Isaiah”

Isaiah 6:1-13

June 30, 2019

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As I mentioned this morning, in my preaching this summer I intend to take under consideration some particularly important texts from the prophecy of Isaiah, the greatest of the prophets of Israel, texts that, each in its own way, are representative of the teaching of the book as a whole.

Text Comment

- v.1 The exact year is not known but it was about 740 B.C. Remember, in John 12:41 we are told that the “Lord” whom Isaiah saw was none other than Jesus Christ. Here in v. 1 the word is *Adonai*, Hebrew for “Lord,” but in v. 3 it is *Yahweh*. That Jesus Christ *is* none other than *Yahweh* is a fact that has immense implications for anyone’s understanding of the Bible! In 745 B.C. the “vigorous imperialist” Tiglath-pileser III ascended to the imperial throne and the fortunes of Assyria began to rise. A newly resurgent Assyrian empire now strode the ancient near eastern stage. The Assyrian empire had existed for a long time and had often been a power to reckon with, but had been in decline for some time before the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. Her weakness had been Uzziah’s good fortune, but it had blinded Israel, the northern kingdom, to the looming disaster. Assyria’s fortunes changed dramatically under a thrusting new leader. Remember, because of his sin of violating the holiness of the priesthood, Uzziah spent the last years of his life in isolation as a leper. Isaiah seems to have regarded Uzziah’s situation as a parable of the spiritual condition of Judah at the time.

Isaiah says that that he *saw* the Lord. It is true, as the Bible says, that no one can *see* the Lord and live, but from time to time the Lord made his presence visible in some form or fashion to convince or comfort his people, and especially his prophets to whom he gave his revelation for transmission to his people. *But notice the reticence!* We are not told *what* Isaiah saw. We read of a robe but not of what was in the robe. We are given a more explicit description of the heavenly seraphim, but nothing more of God himself. What Isaiah *saw* perhaps remained a mystery even to him!

It was not an accident that this vision was given to Isaiah *in the temple*. It was in the temple where the Lord’s presence was most often made manifest. The temple was, always symbolically, sometimes literally the place where heaven and earth met.

- v.2 *Seraph* means “burning one.” “*im*” is the masculine plural ending for Hebrew nouns. *Seraphim* is thus more than one seraph. Interestingly, this is the only place in the Bible where this order of angels is mentioned. Their description emphasizes the holiness of God. If you had no prior knowledge and I were to tell you that seraphim had six wings and asked you what you thought they did with those six wings, you would of course assume that they fly with them. But with one pair they covered their faces before the glory of God and with two they covered their feet.

- v.3 As we noted this morning, Isaiah’s characteristic description of the Lord throughout the book is “the Holy One of Israel.” The basic idea of “holy” in the Bible is *separateness* and when used of God refers to those qualities in God that set him apart from us, especially his transcendent majesty and perfect moral purity. These are the very qualities that make God awesome, even terrifying to encounter, as was the case here. Their thrice repeated “holy” is a way of laying great emphasis on it.
- v.4 Shaking is the customary reaction of earth to the divine presence. [Motyer, 77] There was such shaking at Sinai, and Haggai speaks of the Lord’s coming when again the earth will shake. Likewise, there was an earthquake at the crucifixion and again at the resurrection of the Lord! [Matt. 27:51; 28:2]
- v.5 This is hardly the only time in the Bible when the sight of God or his glory sent a man to his knees or his face to the ground in the recognition of the vast chasm that separates the holy God from sinful man. Think of Peter, after the great catch of fish, on his face before the Lord crying out, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” We cannot think too often of the fact that we would do the same and say the same were we to see the glory of God.
- v.7 The fire *from the altar* represents atonement, propitiation – the turning away of God’s holy wrath by the death of a substitute – and so that divine provision of Christ as our sacrifice by which the sins of those who trust the Lord are forgiven and removed. The coal was touched to Isaiah’s lips because he had said that he was a man of unclean lips. He might just as well have said unclean heart or unclean hands or unclean eyes, for we sin with all of them, but he said lips, the organ of so many of our sins of both commission and omission.
- v.8 Isaiah is near enough to overhear the Lord ask the question: “Who will go for us?” Interestingly the NT relates this text to both the Lord Jesus, as we have already noted, and the Holy Spirit (in Acts 28:25). The “us” is a self-referencing plural of consultation (think of the so-called “imperial we”); it is a form of self-address. We learn only later that it was a way of God referring to himself that left room for the revelation of his triune life. [Motyer, 78; Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 59-61]
- v. 13 The great themes of the prophets were three: 1) the condemnation of the people’s betrayal of God’s covenant and the promise of punishment for it; 2) the promise of restoration and salvation for a future generation of God’s people and ultimate salvation at the end of history; and 3) hope and encouragement for the remnant of faithful Israelites in the meantime. Here we have reference to that remnant, or, as Isaiah puts it, the stump of the fallen tree from which new growth can spring.

The message that Isaiah was given to preach, however, was not what he would have expected surely. His preaching was intended to harden not soften Judah’s heart, to confirm the Jews in their rebellion, not deliver them from it. It would culminate, after Isaiah’s lifetime in the exile of the Jews to Babylon, a result that Isaiah forecasts with

repeated emphasis later in the book. The prophet, like Jeremiah after him, was left with no illusions about a happy ending in his own time.

An interesting question posed by the position of this narrative is this: why doesn't it begin the book? Why do we find it in chapter 6 instead of chapter 1? Might we not expect to find Isaiah's call at the beginning of his prophecy? We find Jeremiah's call in the first chapter of his prophecy? We find Moses' call in Exodus 3 before he actually delivers any word from God to man. Why do we have the narrative of Isaiah's call after five chapters of his preaching? Some have suggested that chapters 1-5 are the record of a ministry that Isaiah conducted *before* his call. Perhaps at that time he was a prophet, but prophet with a lower case "p." Perhaps we should think of him as simply a minister of the word, not yet a man with the official office of "Prophet of the Lord." Think of the young men who were the aides of Elijah and Elisha, perhaps the equivalent of some lower order of the ministry. Possible; but I think there is another explanation more likely than that.

The oracles or messages from the Lord that we find in chapters 1-5 are undated. They do not address any particular moment in Judah's history. But they are highly typical in their relentless exposure of Judah's sin and its consequences for the people in due time. In other words, these chapters would have been preached *after* Isaiah's call, but placed together here serve as a kind of preface for the book. They describe the spiritual situation in which Isaiah was to conduct his ministry. They explain *why* his ministry would take the form that it did; why he would be told at the time of his call that summoning Judah to repentance would prove futile. The rot had gone too far. [Young, I, 232-233; Motyer, 40, 42]

So, we have before us in Isaiah chapter 6 the account of Isaiah's call to be a prophet of Yahweh. How old was he at the time? What had he been doing with his life before this experience? Precisely how did he proceed from this moment to a public ministry? We are not told. These are not the sort of questions that interested the writers of Holy Scripture. None of the prophets is furnished with a biography! But every prophet of God had some such experience: an encounter with God in which the man was authorized, accredited, and set apart to declare God's will to God's people and the world. Isaiah's experience was transcendent; so far as we know more so than any other prophet's call, except for Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. If this happened – as it surely did – then no wonder it is recorded for us in Isaiah's prophecy. *This* is something you and I need to know!

Now, it is easy enough for us to understand *why Isaiah needed to be given* such an experience of the glory of God and to receive such a message from the Lord. Whether or not he knew it when he woke up that morning and made his way to the temple – I suspect he did not and that the experience was for him a bolt out of the blue – these few moments in the presence of God were to change his life, and not his only but the life of the people of God forever. *He needed to know something of the God he was to be working for.* The people of Judah certainly did not have this conception of God. As Isaiah will make painfully clear throughout his prophecy, the Jews had come to think of Yahweh as they thought of the pagan gods whom they had also begun to worship (Baal, Ashtereth, Ishtar, and so on), as if Yahweh were like those gods: an ill-tempered, unpredictable, hardly omnipotent local deity who did his best to protect those who worshipped him, especially if they were generous with their gifts.

More than this, Isaiah needed an experience of the transcendent majesty of God because his assignment was going to prove a very difficult one. He was being sent with a message virtually no one wished to hear and to which very few would respond favorably. For that reason, *he had to believe it without question or reservation*. If the preacher didn't believe his own message, if he had no enthusiasm for it, it was inevitable that no one else would take it seriously. Whether the people responded in faith or not, the message needed to be preached with conviction, urgently and without apology. It was the message Yahweh wanted Judah to hear. It was Yahweh's Word to Israel! It would accomplish his purpose which, in this case, was to harden Jewish hearts, not bring them to repentance. The point of no return had been passed some years ago. Yahweh was determined to punish this generation, not to save them. These people were fixed in their unbelief and their rebellion. And Isaiah's preaching would set their unbelief and their rebellious spirit in stone. How? Well in very much the same way it is happening in our culture today. Condemnation provokes anger at one's offended pride; anger and pride provoke disdain; and disdain provokes a determination to double-down on the course the unbelievers have chosen for themselves. *Isaiah's preaching, if you can believe it, made the Jews proud to be pagans!* Isaiah preached God's message with conviction nevertheless precisely because he had seen and heard the God from whom the message had come! Isaiah would have his struggles, but he never doubted or questioned the message he had been given to proclaim to God's people.

Perhaps also this vision of God in his majesty, a gift given to very few men in the history of mankind, was compensation for the depressing assignment that Isaiah would be given to fulfill. It is no fun to be widely disliked if not actually hated. It is still less fun to be sneered at by the people who seem to matter in society, by the powerful people. It is no fun to think that you are doing little more than beating your head against a brick wall. It is no fun to preach the doom of a people and a country that you love. But that was to be Isaiah's thankless task. And it is not too much to think that the Lord was rewarding his man with an experience virtually unparalleled in human history to soften the blow, to compensate for the troubles he was to endure as the Lord's prophet. I have long remembered the little anecdote with which J.I. Packer began the second chapter of his masterpiece, *Knowing God*.

“I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. ‘But it doesn't matter,’ he said at length, ‘for I've known God and they haven't.’”

I imagine that Isaiah must have said a similar thing again and again, if only to himself, when time after time some priest or so-called prophet, or king, or officer of the court, or wealthy member of his synagogue, sneered or in some other way expressed derision because Isaiah was beating the same old drum. “I've seen God and they haven't.”

And I suppose – don't you – that there was hardly a day in Isaiah's life, difficult as it so often was, depressing as it almost always was – that Isaiah didn't think back to that day in the temple and the glory of God that he saw, the appearance of the seraphim, and the sound of the divine voice that he heard. He must have taken comfort from that recollection a great many times. Isaiah was no block of stone. He was a man who, like any other man, wanted to be liked; wanted to be appreciated; and, as a Jewish patriot, wanted his people to do the right thing so that they

might prosper. When his lot proved to be otherwise, he must have been particularly grateful that it was so easy for him to remember that if God is for him, who could be against him; and that the nation's circumstances, bleak as they were, had been ordered by the Lord who was judging Judah for her sins. That is what this superb event must have meant to Isaiah.

But the more pressing question is: what is the importance of this narrative *for us*? We have no difficulty understanding the importance of this experience for Isaiah, but since this is the most elaborate narrative of a prophet's call in the Old Testament – once again apart from that of Moses – what is its great point for believers like ourselves who can only read of Isaiah's transcendent experience these many years later, indeed, in our case more than 2,700 years later? We haven't seen God in his glory as Isaiah did. We haven't seen the seraphim or heard their "Sanctus" resounding in the temple. This narrative isn't in the Bible to teach us that we can have the same experience Isaiah had. Only a select few men have ever had such an experience. Peter, James, and John saw the Lord Jesus transfigured on the mountain top in Galilee and the two who survived long enough to write books of the New Testament both spoke of it, so great an impression it had made. But even most of the 12 disciples of the Lord never had *that* transcendent experience, though seeing the Lord after his resurrection must have come close! Many Christians have, from time to time, thrilled to the experience of the nearness of God or the sense of his greatness or love felt in the soul. But they haven't seen what Isaiah saw or heard what Isaiah heard. So, what are we to carry away for ourselves from the experience of the great prophet thousands of years ago?

The answer to that question, I think, is actually obvious in the text itself. The whole importance of Isaiah's *seeing* the Lord high and lifted up is that *it is this Almighty God* whose word he was now to proclaim to Judah. This was his commissioning as a spokesman, an ambassador for God himself to the people of God. *We are the people of God*. We, living in the year of our Lord 2019, are the people of God. Isaiah's Word is that mighty word *to us*, therefore, and it comes not ultimately from Isaiah, but from Yahweh himself. And as God's Word it has power both to harden and to save, to fix us under God's judgment or to deliver us to heaven; the very things it accomplished in Isaiah's day as it proceeded from God through the prophet to the people.

You remember Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. In that sermon he reminded his congregation that Jesus had been accredited or attested to them *by God* by means of the mighty works and wonders and signs that God had done through him. In the generation of the prophets or the apostles themselves the Word of God was furnished with demonstrative proof. How did Israel know that Elijah was speaking from and for God himself? His predictions, specific as they were, came true and he wielded supernatural power in the Lord's name. True enough, not every prophet performed miracles; indeed, the only miracle performed by a biblical prophet not named Moses, Elijah or Elisha, so far as we know, was performed by Isaiah, when years after his call, to confirm a promise the Lord made to Hezekiah, the shadow of the sun moved backwards on the sundial (38:7-8). But even prophets who never wielded supernatural power – think of Hosea or John the Baptist – stood in that same long line of faithful men who revered the Word of God so far given and proclaimed it with power to the people of God. And the line itself had at its beginning and in its middle and would have again at its end (in the ministry of Jesus and his apostles) these dramatic, self-authenticating demonstrations of divine presence and divine power. The way Isaiah knew that the Word he had been given to preach was nothing other than the

Word of the living God *is the same way we know the divine authority of that Word*. God appeared to the man and gave him a commission to preach the messages that God would give to him. We weren't there when that happened, but faithful Isaiah told us what he saw and heard.

We never saw the Lord high and lifted up, but Isaiah did. We never saw the glory of God at the burning bush, but Moses did. We never saw Jesus of Nazareth with the glory of God upon him, but Peter, James, and John did. We were never in the Spirit on the Lord's Day as John was when given his great revelation, but John was. Does anyone here think these good men were lying to us? Does anyone here think that these men couldn't distinguish between the sight of the glory of God and mental impressions produced by exhaustion or indigestion? Does anyone think that the message they proclaimed – honest, powerful, fearful, transcendent, and wonderful as it is – was their own invention? It is precisely the presence of all of this eyewitness testimony – testimony utterly consistent with itself, relentlessly honest and searching, utterly commanding of our belief, utterly convincing – that lies at the foundation of our confidence that the Bible is nothing less than the Voice of God. We hear the voice of God in the pages of Holy Scripture in some significant part *because those who wrote it actually heard the voice of God delivering it to them*, as Isaiah did here. And what God was it who was speaking and commanding him? It was Yahweh, high and lifted up, the creator of heaven and earth, the Lord of the hosts of seraphim. We may never have seen that, but the one who wrote this great book did, a book that is full of unlikely prophecies that nevertheless came to pass; all impossible to explain apart from what Isaiah has told us here.

And it is because Isaiah is the Word of God, a message to us from God himself, that it has had and has exercised through the ages such tremendous power. I said that I was preaching texts from Isaiah that were representative of the book as whole. What we have here in chapter 6 we have again and again throughout the book, the divine power and authority of God's Word. Consider this from chapter 55 verses 10 and 11.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

In other words, the Word of God is God's servant, dispatched to do the bidding of its master. [Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 21-22] Or as Martin Luther put it in his own inimitable way:

“...the words of God's mouth are not so many merely grammatical vocables. The words of the mouth of God are true, and actual, and essential *things*. The sun and the moon; the heavens and the earth; Peter and Paul; you and I are all so many words of God.” [Cited in Whyte, *Walk, Character, and Conversation of Jesus Christ*, 194-195]

God spoke those things and you and me into being. That is how powerful his Word really is! Now, like the miracles that occurred with stunning impact at a few turning points in the history of revelation, but are by no means found everywhere and always, so the demonstration of the tremendous power of the Word of God is likewise to be seen only here and there. As Isaiah only saw the Lord high and lifted up once in his life, and as we have never had a similar experience,

so over the years of our Christian life it is possible for us to come to think of the Bible as just a collection of teaching – true to be sure, and important without a doubt – but not to see it as the tremendously powerful work of God that it is. That was Judah’s problem. Here was Isaiah spouting again; what a blowhard. I’m tired of his message. There are plenty of people, even many in the church, who think the same way today. The Bible doesn’t blow them over; it doesn’t terrify them; it doesn’t elate them. But now and again the Lord bears witness to the power of his Word.

I have had occasion through the years to collect a number of such testimonies to the power of God’s word and occasions when that power has been demonstrated beyond the possibility of honest doubt. Occasions great and small. Great like the Reformation or the Great Awakening. Martin Luther, in a sermon preached in Wittenberg in 1522, wittily bore witness to the power of the Word of God. He said, if you remember, that the Reformation was advancing because he, Melancthon, and Amsdorf sat in the pub drinking beer while the Word of God did all the work! [Cited in Truman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 162 (cf. 94-95)]

Or consider this from Charles Spurgeon.

“I was asked to go to a public-house, and see a woman who was dying. I found her rejoicing in the Savior. I asked her how she had found the Lord. ‘Reading that,’ she replied, handing me a torn piece of newspaper. I looked at it, and found that it was part of an American paper, containing an extract from one of ‘Spurgeon’s Sermons,’ which extract had been the means of her conversion. ‘Where did you get this newspaper from?’ I said. She answered, ‘It was wrapped around a parcel which was sent me from Australia.’ ... Think of that. Sermon preached in London, conveyed to America, an extract reprinted in a newspaper there, that paper sent to Australia, part then torn off (as should say, accidentally) for the parcel, dispatched to England, and, after all its wanderings, conveys salvation to the woman’s soul. God’s word shall not return to him void.” [Cited in Nettles, *Living By Revealed Truth*, 470]

Or consider this great piece of the history of salvation and the kingdom of God from the mid-20th century. Jacob DeShazer was one of the Doolittle raiders, the bombing raid on Japan early in the Second World War. It did little damage to Tokyo, but it raised American morale significantly. Most of the crewmen on those bombers crash-landed in China and then found safety among the Chinese. But a few were captured, and Jacob was among them. He spent the rest of the war in Japanese hands, most of the time in China. Months on end in solitary confinement in wilting heat or shivering cold, no books, no radio; only from time to time was there fellowship with other prisoners; no newspapers, only rarely a little exercise outside his nine foot by five-foot cell. No word as to how the war was going except the reports the guards gave them which were almost always untrue.

In May 1944, two long years into his captivity, a Bible fell into DeShazer’s hands. As it was the only one and there were a number of men wanting to read it, DeShazer had it for three weeks. In those three weeks he read through the entire Bible several times. He read through the prophets, including Isaiah, six times. He spent time memorizing verses. He had never been a Christian before this. But the Bible seemed suddenly alive to him and powerful. He had been for years

careless, indifferent to God, and skeptical of Christian claims. But now he was arrested by the Word of God, convinced by it, alive to its supernatural origin. It was as if the Bible itself had filled his cell with brilliant light, with the glory of God itself! He would compare again and again what the prophets had said long before would come to pass with the account of the fulfillment of those prophecies in the New Testament.

And as the three weeks passed DeShazer found himself believing it all: that he was sinner and Christ was the Savior and that by faith in him he could have, even in that prison cell, peace with God and eternal life. And in that seemingly hopeless place he found true joy and firm and indestructible hope. He still had some bad habits – a quick temper, vulgarity in his speech, dishonesty, and so on. But now he noticed his sins, saw them as the sins they were, and sought forgiveness for them. And now he found a strange new power to do what he had never imagined doing before, even loving and showing kindness and forgiveness to his guards, cruel as they often were. And in that experience of the power of the Word of God because it is God's own word sent to do his will, Jacob DeShazer joined a great company who came to new life reading the Bible, the church father Cyprian, the Great Awakening poet William Cowper, the 19th century Anglican bishop J.C. Ryle, the 20th century apologist Francis Schaeffer, and a host of others. DeShazer would later return to Japan as a missionary and then reading DeShazer's story in a tract, encountering the Word of God as it were second hand, Mitsuo Fuchida, the pilot who commanded the attack on Pearl Harbor, became a Christian. That is the Word of God not returning empty! That is the tremendously powerful thing you now hold in your lap or in your hand!

And I could go on and on with such stories and you have stories of your own. The word of God doesn't always, it doesn't even usually work in such dramatically and visibly powerful ways, but it is always working, always accomplishing God's will. In your life and mine and all of the world every moment of the day and night it is always accomplishing God's will. Why? Because the God whose word it is, is the God that Isaiah saw high and lifted up in the temple, the God before whose glory he fell on his face and cried out a confession of his sins; the God whose glory fills the seraphim with wonder, no matter how many times they have seen it! That God is the God who speaks in his Word!

And if that is so, then what of us, these long years later? Well, it is obvious, isn't it? We should treasure this Word, we should read it - always understanding that it is, in fact, the very voice of the Almighty to us -, learn it, ponder it, take it to heart, and practice it in our lives. Augustine put it this way: "For now treat the Scripture of God as the face of God. Melt in its presence." Is that not right if the God who speaks in that Word is the very God who gave the Word to Isaiah that day in the temple? As Dr. Packer once wrote: "We should read the Bible as if the letters RSVP were written at the head of every page." [In Ryken, *J.I. Packer*, 238]

I've never seen God high and lifted up, the train of his robe filling the temple, seraphim hovering above him and singing the Sanctus while covering their faces and their feet with their wings. But Isaiah saw all of that and then told us what God said to him.