

THE CALL OF ISAIAH

The book of Isaiah is a grand and wonderful book. It is quoted in the New Testament more frequently than any other Old Testament book. It was valuable to the early Christians, and it is valuable to us today. As the apostle Paul says, “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15.4).¹ The book of Isaiah begins by portraying the sinfulness of the people of Israel.

An ox knows its owner,
and a donkey its master’s manger,
But Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.
Alas, sinful nation,
people weighed down with iniquity,
Offspring of evildoers,
sons who act corruptly!
They have abandoned the Lord,
They have despised the Holy One of Israel,
They have turned away from him (Isaiah 1.3-4).

Israel had forsaken God and was worse than the ox which at least has enough sense to return to its owner’s crib for fodder. The people were worse than Sodom and Gomorrah in their religious formality (see Isaiah 1.10). The sacrifices which Israel brought to God, in conformity to the law, were displeasing to God because social justice prevailed. Isaiah reveals God’s view of Israel with these words:

I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,
They have become a burden to me.
I am weary of bearing them.
So when you spread out your hands in prayer,

¹Unless indicated otherwise, scripture quotations are from New American Standard Bible (1971).

I will hide my eyes from you,
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of bloodshed.
Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from my sight.
Cease to do evil, learn to do good;
Seek justice, reprove the ruthless;
Defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1.14-17).

Israel did not realize that sacrifice and prayer are an abomination to God if not offered in a spirit of humility and obedience. In chapter 5, Israel is depicted as a vineyard, God's vineyard. God has tried all possible ways to make his vineyard, Israel, productive. But when all has failed, God, the owner, decides to destroy his vineyard.

It is to this wicked generation of God's people that Isaiah is called to be a spokesman for God. The call of Isaiah is recorded in chapter 6 of his book. Here Isaiah records a vision that he saw, and this vision may be divided into four different parts. The first part of the vision is about God's glory.

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of his robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke (Isaiah 6.1-4).

God is represented as seated on his throne, above the ark of the covenant in the most holy place of the temple, where the glory of God is manifested. Christ, in the same manner, is seated on the right hand of God on the throne of his glory (see Acts 7.55, 56; Colossians 3.1). God's train, which is the part of the robe trailing behind, filled the temple, thus symbolizing the fullness and overflowing of the Divine Glory. The angelic attendants, the seraphim, hovered round about the Lord ready to do his bidding. Each seraphim covered his face with two wings, counting himself

unworthy to look upon the Most Holy God. Each also covered his feet, or his whole lower parts, with two wings in token of reverence. The seraphim cried one to another, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.”

God’s glory not only filled all the temple but all the earth as well. The Psalmist writes:

Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel,
Who alone works wonders.
And blessed be his glorious name forever;
And may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen, and Amen (Psalm 72.18-19).

The glory of the Lord certainly can be seen everywhere—in animal life, in human life, in the created world, in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and in the entire universe. And the full glory of the Lord God is to be found in the person of Jesus, the Messiah (see 2 Corinthians 4.6). For Isaiah, though, God’s presence and glory is symbolized further by the shaking of the foundations of the threshold of the temple and, as in 1 Kings 8.10 and Ezekiel 10.4, by the presence of smoke.

No wonder Isaiah cried out, “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” (Isaiah 6.5). This part of the vision is about human sinfulness. In the presence of God, “all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isaiah 64.6). This was the sentiment of Peter, something for us to emulate, who “fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’” (Luke 5.8). The apostle Paul says it like this, “All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3.23). And because all have sinned, all need forgiveness from that sin. Appropriately, the next part of the vision of Isaiah is about forgiveness and cleansing.

Then 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." Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6.6-8).

Fire is a symbol of purification as it removes the impurities from metals. So one of the angelic attendants takes a live coal from the altar and places it upon Isaiah's lips. It was Isaiah's lips that were touched, since this was the immediate part of his body that Isaiah would use in service to God. He was to be a spokesman for the Almighty. And the live coal was taken from the altar of burnt offering which, according to the law of Moses, was kept burning continually.

Even today, the altar of forgiveness is open continually to all those who will believe and obey. This purging from sin wrought upon Isaiah could be accomplished only by the altar sacrifices that were performed in Old Testament times. These Old Testament sacrifices have as their antitype Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, he entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, he entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9.11-14).

Only through the blood of Christ can we have forgiveness today. If we are to receive that forgiveness, we must believe that Christ was "offered once to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9.28). This belief will lead us to confess Jesus as Messiah (i.e., Christ) and Lord. And if Christ is the Lord of our lives, we will turn away from our sins and turn to him for our salvation. Paul writes in Ephesians 1.7-8, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished on us."

But not only must we be cleansed, we must be committed to the task of following God and his son Jesus Christ. Isaiah 6.8 says, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” This part of the vision of Isaiah is about commitment to God and to the work that he has for us. Few would be willing to proclaim an unwelcome message to the Jews of Isaiah’s day. But Isaiah, assured of his cleansing and the forgiveness of his sin, now stands ready to speak forth the message of God. “Here am I. Send me,” he said. What was Isaiah’s commission?

And he [the Lord] said, “Go, and tell this people;
keep on listening, but do not perceive;
keep on looking, but do not understand.
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
their ears dull,
and their eyes dim,
Lest they see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and repent and be healed” (Isaiah 6.9-10).

This is not to say that God desired the condemnation of his own people. But it is to say that God will allow the hearts of the disobedient to be hardened further by the proclamation of the truth. What is our commission today? Jesus said, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16.16; NRSV).² To the one who believes and obeys, the good news about Jesus is a message of life. But to the one who disbelieves and does not obey, the good news is a message of condemnation and hardening.

“Lord, how long?” cried the prophet. God answered, “Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people, and the land is utterly desolate” (Isaiah 6.11).

²From New Revised Standard Version (1989).

Isaiah was to proclaim tidings and judgment until God destroyed the nation of Israel by the powerful armies of other nations. In the same way, we may cry, “How long, O Lord?” Our work under God’s rule will last until our dying day. But even when we are dead and gone, if the Lord has not come again as he promised, the good news will be proclaimed until this earth shall be laid desolate, at which time “the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (2 Peter 3.10).

In these days of sin and evil, we, like Isaiah, need to lift our eyes and behold the glory of God. This mighty vision of God’s glory will lead us to realize our own sinfulness, and it will put in our hearts a desire for forgiveness and cleansing of our sin. This restoration and renewal to God’s service is made possible by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Then, once we have been made free from sin, we can commit ourselves to the task of living by faith day by day and telling others about this good news.