



# Whom Shall I Send?

*The Commission  
of Isaiah*

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ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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# Whom Shall I Send?

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# Foreword

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On behalf of my friend, Eric Alexander, and the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, it is my privilege and delight to recommend this booklet to you, dear reader. Eric delivered this message from Isaiah 6 years ago at an assembly of ministers; yet, it is ever so needed today *for all Christians*. As we think of the prophet's calling and commission, let us consider our own calling and commission—to be salt and light in a world of decay and darkness—and the necessity of our "guilt being pardoned" and our "sin atoned for" in which we find "both the *qualification* and the *motivation* for serving God." To quote Eric,

"It is only a profound work of grace that has opened our eyes to see the depths of God's atoning mercy which in our own generation propel us into a glad abandon to God in thankfulness and joy, ready to do anything, go anywhere, make any sacrifice and respond joyfully to any command... We need to catch something of that spirit, that wide-eyed wonder at the possibility of serving God. We need a continual sense of the unbelievable privilege it is to serve "the high and lofty One, whose name is holy."

May the Lord bless your reading of Eric's message as you ponder Isaiah's call and commission as well as your own qualification and motivation to say with glad abandon, "Here am I, Lord, please send me!"

To Him

who calls and qualifies sinners for servanthood.

James W. Bruce  
Vice-Chairman of the  
Alliance Board of Directors





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When we refer to the Servant Chapters in Isaiah, we are usually thinking about the servant songs which describe the character and ministry of Jehovah's perfect servant, the Messiah. Yet in another sense, Isaiah himself is also Jehovah's servant, commissioned during a formative encounter with God in chapter 6. I think John Oswalt is therefore right when he refers to this as "A Call To Servanthood" in his commentary.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah 6 can be taken in two parts, consisting of a revelation of God's glory (vv. 1-7) and a commission to God's service (vv. 8-13). Certainly this chapter describes what became a definitive experience for Isaiah, shaping and determining the contours of his life and ministry. It is not surprising that, throughout the book, his characteristic way of referring to God is as "the Holy One of Israel." As Oswalt remarks "the glory, majesty, holiness and righteousness of God became the ruling concepts of his ministry."<sup>2</sup>

There has of course been much discussion about the nature of the vision, and whether it was literal, or a more mystical and visionary experience. The important thing is that it was a *real* experience, and quite crucial for the forming of Isaiah's character and ministry. This is therefore not only the calling of a servant of God; it is also the making of a man of God. The chapter bears testimony to the fact that serving God is never a substitute for knowing Him. In God's work, the man I am matters infinitely more than the work I do.

But if serving God is never a substitute for knowing Him, it is equally true that knowing *about* God is never a substitute for knowing Him. Theology, for Isaiah, was never merely a matter of

academic competence, or doctrinal orthodoxy—it was something that burned into his heart and soul and mind. The glory of God was like a fire in his bones, as the word of God was for Jeremiah. Biblical preachers will often say to one another that we do not preach our own experience. But it is also true that when we preach the glories of the Gospel of God, we must preach them as men who have experienced their power.

### **“I saw the LORD” (v. 1)**

Clearly Isaiah wants us to know the *time* when this vision or revelation occurred. In v. 1 he clarifies that, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.” There could be a number of reasons for that. One could be personal. Many scholars think that Isaiah was a member of the Royal household, a courtier of Uzziah the king, and therefore knew the king intimately. He would therefore have watched Uzziah grow in stature as one of the greatest national leaders since Solomon. But of course, the last years of Uzziah were shrouded in tragedy as he became unfaithful to God and was brought under His judgment. Uzziah ended his days in utter uselessness in a leper's house. His epitaph is written in 2 Chronicles 26:15: “He was marvelously helped until he became powerful.”

There are so many lessons from Uzziah's life, not only for Isaiah but for all of us in the ministry. Only God knows what seeds of sin lie in our hearts, even in old age. And only God knows how much we need to guard our own souls, especially when we are in places of leadership. When we long for power we need to be very sure of why we long for it. God will never grant us His power divorced from His glory.

That leads me to the other great significance of the time of this vision. Its significance is not only personal to Isaiah but spiritual for the rest of the nation.

One of the great dangers of a period of prosperity, associated with a gifted individual, is that the people of God can so readily put their confidence in the arm of the flesh. That was one of Isaiah's constant themes. Judah was constantly looking in the wrong



direction for alliances which would secure them against the enemy. Here is Isaiah, in chapter 31, warning them about this very thing:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord... the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit (vv. 1–3).

At this time of national change and uncertainty, Isaiah is given a vivid reminder of where the true throne is, and who is the true king. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne."

Now the phrase "I saw the Lord" is full of interest. The fact is that it was a basic tenet of Hebrew religion that no one could see God and live. You remember Samson's parents in Judges 13, when the angel of the Lord ascended in a flame of fire, Manoah says "We are doomed to die! ... We have seen God!" This is one of the things that convinces Isaiah of his ruination: "[My] eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

So, what exactly did Isaiah see?

There are certain elements in God's character which are revealed to, and through, the prophet in this vision, and the first is significant in the light of what I have just been saying.

### *God's Incomprehensibility*

Even in a vision in which Isaiah says "I saw the Lord," all we find him able to describe is the "train of his robe." So as we eagerly await Isaiah's description of what God is like, all he is able to say is "The train of his robe filled the temple."

Now that is characteristic of every reported vision of God in Scripture. In Exodus 24:10, Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu went up to meet with God along with seventy elders of Israel. We read that "they saw God." And how do they describe him? All Moses can say is "the pavement under his feet was sapphire blue." The same is true of course in Ezekiel. He has the same problem after he tells us in Chapter 1 of his prophesy that "the heavens were opened

and I saw visions of God." But what does he see? He describes it like this in v. 26:

Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire, and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking (vv. 26–28).

All he can speak of is "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."

Now there is a direct line from the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility to the necessity of revelation. It is because God is incomprehensible that we are utterly dependent upon Him revealing himself. Now where has He revealed Himself primarily and perfectly? The answer is in Jesus Christ His only Son. John 1:18 reminds us "no one has ever seen God, but God the only Son who is at the Father's side has made Him known."

Now later in his gospel, in John 12:39, John quotes from Isaiah 6 and concludes "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him."

What glory then was this that Isaiah saw? It was the very glory of God which was revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Isaiah is thereby made aware of God's incomprehensibility and of the absolute necessity of revelation.

### *God's Sovereignty*

Isaiah describes his vision for us in v. 1 and interprets it in v. 5. In v. 1 he does not use the name Jehovah (translated LORD) but a word which means "sovereign one." However, in v. 5 he enlarges and interprets this "my eyes have seen the King, Jehovah (LORD) Almighty.

Now Isaiah sees that God's throne is high and exalted and the suggestion is that His sovereignty is absolute, not limited. He is

not only Lord and King; He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Not just power and authority belong to Him but all power and all authority. It is full of significance that this vision became one of the dominant notes of Isaiah's ministry. If his favorite way of referring to God is "the Holy One of Israel", his next most common title for God is "the sovereign LORD." Now there are a number of lessons Isaiah himself draws from this for us.

1. *The seat of ultimate power is the throne of God.* One of the key questions of every generation, which, as Francis Schaeffer put it "grumbles beneath the skin of every thinking man" is "Where does ultimate power reside in the world? Where are the ultimate decisions taken?" Isaiah has the answer, for example in chapter 14:

The Lord Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen..." This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back? (v. 24, 26, 27).

When John F. Kennedy was asked why he wanted to get to the White House, he had no hesitation in replying "because that's where the power is." He was totally misguided; the ultimate decisions in the universe are not made in Washington or Moscow or London or Beijing, but at the throne of God.

2. *The security of God's people derives from God's sovereign power.* In Isaiah 40:10, the prophet calls us to behold the sovereign Lord:

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

The Sovereign Lord is the Shepherd of His people. Their security rests in the fact that the Chief Shepherd is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As J. Gresham Machen once said, "The more we know of God, the more unreservedly we trust Him; the greater be our progress in theology, the simpler and more childlike will be our faith."<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah beholds the incomprehensibility and sovereignty of God. But the dominant note in this revelation, beyond doubt, is the *holiness* of God.

### *God's Holiness*

This is the central theme of the seraphs' song. These angelic beings are given a name which only occurs here in Scripture. It probably means "the fiery ones" or "the burning ones." Significantly, we have a fuller description of them than of God: They have wings, hands, feet, faces, and voices. But even then the focus is on the theme of their song, and their own reactions to what they are singing about. As they call antiphonally to one another and magnify the glory of God, they sing:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

Now the reason for the thrice spoken "holy" may be familiar to some of you in the ministry. Hebrew has no such construction as positive, comparative, and superlative versions of words as in English (*e.g.* good, better, and best). Its mode of emphasis and intensification is by repetition. Thus Jesus says "Verily, verily," or "truly, truly." But this is the only place in the Old Testament where a quality is repeated and repeated again—"Holy, holy, *holy*." This lifts the holiness of God out of the realm of anything else we know. It cannot be measured; thus the heavenly creatures praise Him unceasingly before throne (*cf.* Rev. 4:9).

Now the word "holy" applied to God, embraces everything that makes God distinctively God. As Dr. Packer says, "holy" is everything that sets God apart from us, making Him distinctive; it is everything that sets Him above us making Him worshipful and awesome; it is everything that sets Him against us, making Him an object of terror to us as sinners.<sup>4</sup>

The other theme of the seraphim concerns God's glory (v. 3b). The glory of God is really the outshining of all His character. The root meaning of the word is "weight" or "heaviness" and since the weight of something reflected its worth, it came to mean what

made it worthy of honor. Thus the language of worship is that of worthiness. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (Rev. 5:11). The glory of God then, is everything that makes Him worthy of honor and praise and blessing.

God reveals His glory in three main spheres in Scripture. First in His handiwork, as "the heavens declare the glory of God." Second in His Son, as "the Son is the radiance of God's glory." And the third, astonishingly, is in His people. Do you remember how Jesus says in John 17 that the glory the Father has given Him He will give to the disciples? In this way Paul tells us that as we gaze upon the Lord's glory we are being transformed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

### ***Before the Throne of God (v. 2–5)***

Now Isaiah describes for us a threefold reaction to the holiness and glory of God. The first comes from the unfallen creation, the second from the non-rational creation, and the third from the fallen creation.

The response of the angelic beings called *seraphim* is to bring to God perfect worship. We have need to learn some of the lessons they teach us, as had Isaiah's contemporaries. You may recollect that in chapter 1:11 God responds to the worship of this disobedient people:

"The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats... Stop bringing meaningless offerings!"

There are five features of this perfect worship:

1. Their worship consists in *delighting in God*. They are absorbed by the wonder of His holiness, and marvel at the display of His glory. Their great desire and joy is to exalt and serve him. They do not want to find satisfaction and pleasure for themselves, but to bring glory to the God who has filled their vision.

2. Their worship is *rational and cognitive*, rather than mystical and non-rational. They are communicating with each other in verbal form about the attributes and glory of God.

3. Their worship is marked by a sense of *awe and godly reverence*. Notice that in the presence of God's holiness, they cover their faces with two of their wings. The reason, Calvin suggests, is that just as we cannot gaze upon the brightness of the sun, so even the unfallen creation cannot gaze on the holiness of God uncovered. They are awe-struck by such a sight.

4. Their worship is marked by a *godly humility*. The second pair of wings covers their feet; Professor E.J. Young considered this to be a gesture of humility and unworthiness.<sup>5</sup> The very idea of self-display in worship is abhorrent to a God who is jealous of His own glory and will not give it to another.

5. Their worship is marked by a response of *moral obedience*. Verse 2b tells us that the remaining pair of wings are employed in flying to do the bidding of the Holy One. An example of that is in v. 6 when one of the seraphs flies to bring the assurance of mercy to Isaiah. Worship cannot be divorced from obedience. Indeed true worship, as Paul confirms, is the presentation of our bodies to God to be used by Him for whatever purpose He may chose (Rom. 12).

True and acceptable worship is therefore God-centered, rational, reverent, humble, and morally obedient.

We see secondly a trembling upheaval running throughout the created order. The seemingly stable earth heaves under Isaiah's feet, as though nature were a better interpreter of the character of its Creator than are most men. The ground violently convulsed at this impossible prospect that sinful man should stand in the presence of a thrice holy God. And as if to confirm this, the temple then filled with smoke, obscuring the vision.

That physical upheaval is the earth trembling at the presence of God, as it did at Jesus' death. And that leads to another kind of trembling: It is as though the cry of the seraphim in worship is now drowned by the cry of the prophet in distress: "Woe is me!"

## *Humbled by God's Holiness*

If the response of unfallen creation was one of glorious, pure worship, and if the response of non-rational creation was trembling upheaval at the presence of the Holy One of Israel, the response of the fallen creation is the desolation we see in Isaiah's soul. "Woe to me! I am ruined!" We can scarcely measure the sense of the overwhelming awareness of ruination that Isaiah felt before God's holiness.

"Woe" is the opposite of "blessed." In the sermon on the plain in Luke 6, Jesus parallels the Beatitudes with a series of "woes" against those who are described as the inverse of the blessed. Isaiah himself pronounced woes upon all manner of people in chapter 5. Yet now, being himself confronted by the Holy One, he has no eyes any other and no consciousness of another need but his own. He cries "Woe is me, for I am ruined, finished, without hope!" The man is in consternation of spirit and deep distress of soul. The overwhelming reason for this distress is that the defilement of his own sin has been brought into the presence of the burning holiness of God.

In the story of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, do you remember how Quasimodo stares at the beautiful Esmeralda, whom he has taken up into the towers of the cathedral? There he diffidently says to her, "I never knew how ugly I was until I saw how beautiful you are." Isaiah has discovered a similar sense of ruin. In chapter 5, the prophet pronounces woe upon woe upon woe on the nations for their godless lives; now the only thing that can occupy his mind is the "Woe" pronounced on himself. Clearly there is something in Isaiah's own life and ministry which the vision of God in His glory has pierced.

It is significant that the first thing Isaiah says when he cries out "Woe to me, I am ruined," is that he is a man of unclean lips. In many ways, we would think of that as an anti-climax. Isaiah says the cause of his sense of desolation and ruination in the presence of God's holiness is his unclean lips. It may be that God is exposing in Isaiah the very thing that Isaiah has been exposing in the people of

Judah—the specific thing which belonged to their way of life! Have you noticed, in studying chapter 5, for example, that what his tongue is really lashing are the areas of life where the people had opportunity to sin. If you study the woes carefully you will see that they are a resounding condemnation of...

- ...greed in the commercial world (v. 8);
- ...debauchery in the artistic world (vv. 11, 12);
- ...and corruption in the legal world (vv. 22, 23).

But now he is faced personally with defilement in the prophetic world. Where he is most gifted, he is most conscious of the pervasive defilement of sin. He learns the truth of what he himself has been preaching, grasping what the apostle Paul later understood when he cried that he was the "chief of sinners" (1 Tim: 1:15). Notice how he does not mourn and tremble over his weaknesses and vulnerabilities; it is his gifts and strengths that need to be cleansed by God, lest they be corrupted and co-opted for some purpose other than God's glory.

And that, I think, is the point of this vision. Just as it was possible for those rebuked in chapter 5 to use their commercial, artistic, and legal worlds for their own corrupt ends, so it is possible for us to use God's service for the display of our own glory rather than God's. And that may be the ultimate blasphemy.

This must be the reason why Isaiah finds himself overwhelmed by the fact that he is "a man of unclean lips." Isaiah stands before God's majesty and holiness in the posture that the Lord later describes through His prophet: "This is the one I look on with favor: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2). Isaiah now identifies himself with the people to whom God has sent him. In the deepest sense, he is no better than they; he sees his own sin, speaks of the same kind of sin in the people, and now sits where they sit.

This is a characteristic of men whom God calls for a particular generation and a particular people at a particular time. Listen, for



example, to Nehemiah, who has begun to see the ruination that disobedience has wrought upon his people, when he hears news about Jerusalem with its walls broken down and its gates burnt with fire:

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive... to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.

But he goes on:

I confess the sins *we* Israelites, *including myself* and my father's family, have committed against you. *We* have acted very wickedly toward you. *We* have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:4–7, emphasis mine).

Nehemiah is broken in spirit and finds the whole of his world crashing around him as he bears the burden of the people's sin and his own.

There is no doubt that every fruitful servant of God must grasp the holiness and glory of God to put him in a right relation to God, and a right relation to the people to whom God is sending him. It is this that brings the humble and contrite spirit. The longer I live, and the more I minister, the more I am persuaded that this lies very near to the core of usefulness: The matter of a humble spirit.

I keep telling divinity students and others about Alexander White, who ministered in Free St. George's in Edinburgh and was one of Edinburgh's great preachers at one stage. At one time he had a young assistant, who very quickly became well known as a preacher in his own right; and White was gracious enough to give the young man the pulpit frequently... perhaps too frequently, as people came more often to hear this young man than to hear White.

One Sunday evening, before a full church, the young man went up the many steps of the pulpit, taking them sometimes two at a time, with a great sense of confidence and assurance. All eyes were on

the young luminary. He had no notes; he had memorized even the Bible passage. He began to speak, and quite suddenly (as has happened to many of us) his mind went completely blank. He had no idea what he was meant to be saying next. He stumbled his way for 15 minutes or so and then, after the hymn, crawled down the pulpit steps back to the vestry. White met him and was ready to help. The man asked "What went wrong, sir?" White replied, "Well, laddie, if you had just gone up the way you came down, you would have had more likelihood of coming down the way you went up!" There is a very profound lesson in that, my brothers, for those of us who minister God's word.

"I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Indeed, there is no doubt that every servant of God needs this devastating sense of God's holiness and glory to be burned into his own soul.

### *Atonement at the Altar (v. 6–7)*

We turn now then from the vision of God's glorious holiness to the vision of God's glorious grace and mercy. At this point, we need to see the true picture of Isaiah in deep darkness in the temple. It is filled with smoke; whatever else that may mean, it certainly increases for Isaiah the sense of awesomeness as a sinner in the midst of the darkness of his own sin. Then, out of that darkness, one of the seraphs flew with a fiery coal from the altar.

The altar in the temple proclaimed a divine provision for sin. In Leviticus we find that the atoning blood is God's gift to sinners. "I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar" (Lev. 17:11). This is the pattern established in Leviticus: By the laying of the priest's hands upon the sacrifice, the sin was transferred from the sinner to the victim. According to the rubric in Leviticus 16:21 for the Day of Atonement, the animal thereby became a substitute for the sinner.

The very sight of that altar would affirm this to Isaiah, and the seraph confirmed it by his words in v. 7: "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Notice how vividly the application of the atonement to the particular

sinner's need is portrayed. Isaiah's experience is not merely an intellectual awareness of God's atoning grace, nor even a spiritual conviction about the work of atonement; it is the personal application of redemption to him by God. All the fruits of atoning mercy, all the effects of a work of propitiation are brought to Isaiah by the seraph. And God brings this atonement to him in abundance, such that it even surpasses the confession of the prophet. As one writer points out, "The sinner confesses such of his sins as he knows; God provides atonement for all the sin he has."<sup>6</sup>

In the fullness of this provision we see that God is the author of atoning mercy, the One who both provides it and applies it. Note the significance of this in v. 7, where the seraph touches Isaiah's lips with a live coal from the altar. Some people think this is the incense-burning stone, while others think it could be a charred ember of the sacrifice. But whatever the symbolism is, the propitiating mercy of God and the completed work of atonement on the altar are applied personally to Isaiah. Some of the older writers used to say you could see here an indication of the Trinity: There is God the Father who has, in His grace and wisdom, devised the atonement; God the Son, who has undertaken the work of atonement on the altar; and God the Holy Spirit, who applies it to the life of the individual believer.

But there is also a work of interpretation, and I want to spend some time on this, for I think it is of great importance.

We would say that the ministries of application and interpretation under the New Covenant are the Holy Spirit's work; He applies the benefits of Christ's death to us. But the ministry of interpretation is the work of Holy Scripture which reveals those those benefits to us. That *verbal* interpretation is vital. This is why the word and sacrament must never be divided from each other. As Calvin says, "Let us therefore learn that the chief part of the sacraments consists in the word, and that without it they are absolute corruptions... turned into stage-plays."<sup>7</sup> God therefore interprets the atonement to Isaiah through His seraph: "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." He clarifies this to the

prophet in verbal form, as it needs to be clarified to us as we receive the benefits of His atoning mercy.

Of course, we know that moment in Isaiah's vision was a foreshadowing of the day when God would display His holiness more clearly than at any other time in history, or at any other place in the universe: At the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, where the One Isaiah saw as the Suffering Servant of Jehovah became the sacrifice and offering for our sins, and bore in His own body our transgressions. At that time the sun was hidden, darkness covered the earth, and Jehovah's Servant knew in His own soul the full force of a Holy God burning with anger against sin. At that time also heaven and earth trembled at the great woe of the Son of God as He cried out in desolation, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" Matthew tells us that the earth shook and the rocks were split (27:51). And it is from that altar of Calvary that God brings us the fruits of redeeming grace, saying "This has touched you; your guilt is purged and your sin is atoned for."

### ***In Service of the Savior (v. 8)***

That was the door that opened before Isaiah, bringing him to the place of servanthood. We now come to the prophet's commission to servanthood. At this point God speaks for the first time: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" It is almost as if Isaiah could not hear the voice of God until he had been made aware of and assured concerning a work of atonement.

It is certainly true that apart from that work of atonement he could not serve God. Atonement provides both the *qualification* and the *motivation* for service. First, there is no possibility of proclaiming God's salvation until we have received it, nor of declaring the glory of this God of Israel until we have been cleansed of the sin that would silence our lips. You may remember how in Joshua 24, the faithless idol-worshipping Israelites protested to Joshua that they too would serve the Lord. They had a superficial view both of God and of His service, and so Joshua replied: "You cannot serve the LORD, for He is a holy God" (v. 19). The qualification for service is

not first the call, but the cleansing. Service is not a means of salvation; it is salvation which makes service possible.

Second, the motivation to serve also arises from God's atoning mercy. Having viewed God's awesome holiness and felt the dreadful despair of being a ruined, lost sinner, Isaiah now experiences the glories of redeeming grace, of divine forgiveness, and of the reality of atonement for his sin. In light of all this, "what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God's service?"<sup>8</sup> It is at least possible, in light of 1 Kings 22:19, that God is addressing the heavenly host when He asks "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And at that point Isaiah interrupts, as it were, and pleads: "Here I am; please send me!" (Oswalt helpfully translates this response as a wide-eyed wondering "Would I do?").

You see, Isaiah is wrapped-up that glad abandon to which Paul was referring when he said, "Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14). He stood as the recipient of divine grace, one who had tasted and seen that the LORD is good, and who had been bathed in God's atoning mercy. It is only a profound work of grace that has opened our eyes to see the depths of God's atoning mercy which, in our own generation, propels us into a glad abandon to God in thankfulness and joy, ready to do anything, go anywhere, make any sacrifice, and respond joyfully to any command.

My dear friends, we need to catch something of that spirit, that wide-eyed wonder at the possibility of serving God. We need a continual sense of the unbelievable privilege it is to serve "the high and lofty One, whose name is holy" (Isa. 57:15). Is it something that abides with you? Pastors, do you still sense that in your ministry?

The costliness of serving God is very great; the pain involved in pastoral ministry especially can be quite overwhelming. But I want to say that above and beyond all that there is no greater privilege in all God's universe than to be a servant of such a God! There is nothing in the world to compare with it. The great mystery, as I often said to my wife when I was in my study and she would come in with coffee, when I would think that I had the whole morning

set aside for nothing except to dig into God's word and to find the glories of it in my own soul—I would often say "Fancy getting paid for doing this!" Pastors, do you not sometimes feel like that?

I think it was Dick Lucas who told a group of ordinands on one occasion that going into pastoral ministry is like becoming Moses' mother; doing the thing that lies closest to your heart and being paid for it! We really need to get hold of this glorious sense of privilege. May I say to you, pastors, that I think our families need to grasp this too. I think our children need to grow up with an awareness that we are not constantly grumbling about the things we lack, the situation we are in, etc.; but that we are continually awestruck by the glory of serving the living God, and by being ambassadors of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, God calls and commissions Isaiah into His service. "Go," He says, "You will do."

### ***The Hard Message (v. 9–10)***

"Go, and tell this people..." (v. 9). There are many general things we learn from God's commissioning of Isaiah. For example, we learn the authority of the God behind the message committed to Isaiah, and likewise the "given" nature of that message which Isaiah was to proclaim. But the main thing which strikes us is the nature of the ministry Isaiah was to undertake:

"Go 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..."

We need to recognize the profound sense of divine grief in these words, as God sends Isaiah to be such a prophet to such people. God takes no pleasure in either the rebellion or the death of the wicked. And yet God is warning Isaiah that in this particular generation he is going to preach *faithfully*, rather than *successfully*. Isaiah is going to encounter people who have no spiritual hearing, nor spiritual sight, nor spiritual understanding. It is as though he is being sent to proclaim God's Word in a land where everyone is dead and blind.

Let me pause here two applications which are quite vital for anyone in the ministry to learn:

*First, success is never a criterion of ministry.* The last few verses of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 testify to this, when Jesus describes the false prophets who come to Him saying "Lord, Lord, did not we prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons, and perform many miracles?" Jesus dismisses them with chilling words: "I never knew you. Away from me, evil doers."

The criterion of true service is obedience to everything that God has sent us to do. He does not call us to success, but to faithfulness. Now, it is possible to shield our own folly or our obtuseness or even our sin behind the idea of "being faithful." It is also possible to be complacent in the name of faithfulness, and to lose a true passion to see the grace of God at work in the lives of men and women. But the principle stands as a basic truth: God does not call us to, nor promise us success. Success as we tend to see it is not a criterion of faithfulness in any ministry.

*Second, success is not only an unbiblical criterion, but also an extremely dangerous criterion.* If we have set our hearts upon success, we can so easily become careless about faithfulness. In this way we are loosened from an absolute commitment to doing God's work in God's way. And so we become more concerned that our methodology should be successful than that it should be biblical. Before long, the very goal and aim and end for which we are living becomes *success* rather than the glory of God.

I remember a missionary who was among the godliest men I have ever known. I have never known a more tender, gracious, loving man, nor anyone who loved God more, or who was more wedded to God's word. At the end of his ministry he knew of 5-6 people who had responded to the Gospel; two had backslided, one had committed suicide, and he did not know where the others were when he came home. I always remember hearing him say,

It broke my heart and my wife's in so many ways; but we went there to do a work that God committed us to, and with all our heart and soul we

did it. Maybe another generation will reap where we have sown, and we are content to leave that to God.

To be sure, verses 9 and 10 are rather strange yet significant verses. They are quoted in all four Gospels (Matt. 13:14-15; Mk. 4:10-12; Lk. 8:10; Jn. 12:39-41). They are also quoted by Paul in Acts 28:26-27, and likely also in Romans 11:8. In each of the Synoptic Gospels, the quotation is linked to the Parable of the Sower and the unresponsive soils. In Acts 28 it is linked to the hardness of heart of the Jewish people: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through the prophet... ."

The common feature in all of these is *a lack of response to the Word of God*. They have closed their ears and shut their eyes to the truth. This is a phenomenon with which many of us will be all-too-familiar. Yet Isaiah is being told that it is *through his preaching* that the hearts of the people will be calloused, their ears dulled, and their eyes closed.

People do not remain the same after they hear the Word of God, whether they receive it or reject it. Just as the sun both melts wax and hardens clay, the same Word of God both produces abundant fruit in the responsive heart, and increasingly hardens the hearts of those who reject it. And this often happens beneath the surface in ways that we don't immediately perceive, even in our own hearts.

I remember as a boy every summer holiday going down to Galloway in the south west of Scotland, where my mother's family farmed. Many a summer's day we boys used to be out with many of the laborers who came over from Ireland to find work. They were huge men with huge hands that had been hardened through labour. I remember how they used to invite us to stick pins into their heavily calloused hands. You see, they had lost all sensation; they did not feel a thing.

My dear brothers and sisters, it is possible to develop calluses on your soul by listening to God's word and ignoring it, by seeing God at work and turning away. We really need to warn people that they are living under a delusion if they imagine that the Word of



God is not doing anything to them; it is in fact hardening them. And that is a very solemn thing to witness.

It is even more solemn that this hardness of heart does not result from preaching fire and brimstone. It was while Isaiah was proclaiming the beauty and glories of the suffering Servant of Jehovah when he had to stop and ask, "Who has believed what he has heard from us?" (53:1).

One day I went to preach at the church of a young friend, and I stayed on to attend the evening service. I heard him extol the glories of redeeming grace and was profoundly moved. The Lord Jesus was uplifted in all His beauty! I told my friend afterwards that it made me long to be a Christian all over again! But there was a couple behind me, and I overheard the husband comment to his wife, "What a lot of boring tripe!"

That makes you tremble, doesn't it?

### *The Holy Seed (v. 11–13)*

God is a God of judgment as well as mercy. He never speaks an idle word; He fulfills not only His promises but also His threats. As Isaiah faces the burden of this ministry, he cries out in anguish: "How long, O Lord?" (v. 11). And so God paints him a picture of Jerusalem ravished by her enemies. Cities are ruined and depopulated, houses deserted, fields despoiled, people exiled, and the land abandoned (vv. 11, 12). Yet this judgement does not mean that God no longer has a people, or that He has ceased building His Church. Verse 13 tells us that the last word will be with God: "But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

Now what is the "holy seed"? Well it is of course the elect of God, the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. Although the land be ravaged and the world despoiled, the Christ's Church will remain. We must not therefore tremble for the cause of God. He is well able to look after His own interests. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 16 when He said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

Now, that gives no guarantee to any denomination or organization. Yet it does mean that though thrones and dominions crash and crumble, the blood-bought people of God, the Church of Christ, will remain until the day when God displays the Church as the masterpiece of the new creation.

A number of years ago, some of Glasgow's beautiful Victorian buildings were wonderfully restored. But for the restoration to take place, it meant that for quite a long time scaffolding and heavy drapes have covered the buildings while the real work was going on beneath. We have so often been amazed when the day has come for the scaffolding to be dismantled, what glory and beauty there is in that stonework. Now the whole of history is merely the scaffolding behind which God is doing the most significant work of all, a work which the world seldom sees: He is calling and creating and transforming and beautifying and sanctifying people for His glory. At the end of time, when Jesus Christ returns, the scaffolding will be removed and God will present His masterpiece.

That is what Paul speaks about in Ephesians 3; it is the great business that God is about in the world. And so, as Paul says in another passage, "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).

May God give us grace to labour faithfully, waiting for the revelation of that glorious day. When God unveils His work and brings down the curtain on human history, all creation will gasp at the glorious thing He has been doing. To be part of it here and now, however small and insignificant our part may be—what a privilege! What a privilege!

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (New York : Macmillan, 1925), 96.
- <sup>4</sup> J.I. Packer, *18 Words: The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know* (Christian Focus: 1981, 2008), 165.
- <sup>5</sup> E.J. Young, *Isaiah*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 241.
- <sup>6</sup> J. Alec Motyer, "Come Let Us Walk In The Light Of The Lord," *Towards the Mark*, vol. 9, no. 1 ( Jan.–Feb. 1980), 9–15.
- <sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 6:7.
- <sup>8</sup> Oswalt, 186.



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