

ISAIAH 6:1-8

WEEK 3



Historical Context & Background

Isaiah is a giant in the legacy of the Jews. He's been called the Shakespeare of Jewish literature, and the New Testament quotes him more often than any other prophet. His prophetic career spanned the reign of four kings in Judah. The third king, Hezekiah, made Isaiah a trusted advisor and lead Judah in a spiritual reformation. But the last king, wicked King Manasseh, eventually had Isaiah—who kept being a buzz-kill and pestering him about what God would want—sawn in half between two planks of wood!

The first five chapters of this book tell us about the people to whom Isaiah was sent as a prophet. These people are the recipients of the great promises of God but did not appear to believe in him. Not living out their birthright as God's chosen people they were setting themselves up for his judgement and living in darkness. It was a time of moral decline: men were drunk and women were vain and took unfair advantage of the widows and fatherless. But judgement is not the only message given to Isaiah. God also promised the dawning of a marvelous great light—the Messiah! At the beginning of chapter 6, God is looking for a prophet to bring this message of judgement and the promise of new grace. Who will that be? Where can the Lord find someone he can use among these fallen people? How will the Lord prepare this person to be his servant?



Related Passages

Leviticus 19:1 - "You shall be holy as I am holy."

Isaiah 1:18-20 - The introduction of Isaiah, the promise of God's cleansing.

Mark 1:1-5 - John the Baptist's role in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

John 20:21 - "As the Father sent me, I am sending you."

Mark 4:10-12 - Here Jesus quotes part of the message given to Isaiah (Is.6:9-10).

Acts 28:25-28 - Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 as part of his task at hand.



Key Terms

Seraphs, Seraphim: Six-winged creatures who perpetually sing the praises of God. This rocks the building on its foundations! Literally, the "Burning Ones." Fire is associated with God's holiness and presence in the early books of the Old Testament and it's fitting here.

His glory: Not some glow or an aura, but the expression of God's stunning character and reality. This expression of Who He Is (I Am) is profoundly convicting to Isaiah.

Iniquity: The willful perversion of God's will and all that result from these choices. 'Iniquity' is a better word in verse 7 because "guilt" is too passive.



Key Themes

Holy, Holy, Holy: The holiness of God is one of the oldest theological doctrines. Moses—one of the first theologians—wrote "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" (Ex. 15:11) In this passage, the seraphs cry is "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord." The repetition of a word in the Hebrew language was a way of expressing a superlative. It might be that God is very, very Holy; but more likely, God is the holiest. In theological terms, this is an expression of God's otherness: God is unique. Unlike everything else in the entire world (or any other world), God is not a creature. He is not created. He is not made up of parts.

Why does all this matter? The cry of the Seraphs is a reminder of just who we are dealing with. God is not just like a big and powerful person (that's Zeus). He is, in some sense, beyond what we can comprehend. This demands a proper humility when dealing with the Almighty—in older terms a "fear of the Lord." C. S. Lewis expressed the holiness of his analogous character Aslan by reminding the children: "He is not a tame lion." God's Holiness tempers our expectations about God. Often we think we have a good grasp on God. Perhaps we reason about what God *must* do if he is to be good or loving based on our expectations for love or goodness. Or perhaps we flippantly approach God or speak of him. Yet the repeated refrain of the characters in Scripture is that God is not so frivolously treated. And yet, the Seraphs remind us that, simultaneously, "the whole earth is full of his glory." God's otherness doesn't mean he's distant, and that's why it's juxtaposed with his nearness to his creation, embodied by God's relationship to Israel and—most fully and finally—in Christ himself.

"Here I am, send me!": A remarkable thing about this passage is that Isaiah volunteers. Contrast God's "call" to Isaiah with his call in other Biblical characters:

- To Abraham: "*The Lord had said to Abraham 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'*" (Genesis 12:1)
- To Moses: "*The Lord called to him from a burning bush 'Moses! Moses!...I am sending you to the King of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of his country.'*" (Exodus 3:4; 3:10)
- To Jonah: "*The Lord spoke his word to Jonah 'Get up, go to the great city of Nineveh, and preach against it.'*" (Jonah 1:1)

With Isaiah, however, it's almost as if the Lord is not speaking to Isaiah at all. It's as if Isaiah just overhears the Lord saying "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" From this, Isaiah steps up and volunteers and says: "Here I am, send me!"

Running from the voice of the Lord is easy to do. Adam and Eve did it. Moses did it. Jonah did it. Isaiah runs to the Lord's voice. He responds faithfully even if he is not specifically identified. It's no surprise then that this verse has been so closely tied to missionary movements and causes. And for good reason: Isaiah volunteers and God sends him to a people who need to hear from the Lord. It is an example for every Christian. Charles Spurgeon famously said, "every Christian is a missionary or an imposter." Every Christian is sent by God into the world to be his ambas-

sador. The Lord needs people to go for him—across the Atlantic or across town or across the room.

The Lost Son: One of the strangest things about this passage is the angel’s response to Isaiah’s uncleanliness. He takes a burning hot coal from the altar fire and burns his lips! Imagine this happening. This experience would have been extremely painful. And yet the angel inflicts the pain. The reality is, our uncleanliness often gets cleaned through suffering: God is the great physician, a surgeon. In C. S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*, there’s a man with a lizard on his shoulder. The lizard symbolizes the man’s lust and, though he desires freedom from it, he does not have the strength to kill it himself. A long scene ensues, where a “Burning One” offers to kill the lizard; the man finally relents, and the angel strikes:

“The next moment the man gave a scream of agony such as I never heard on earth. The burning one closed his crimson grip on the reptile: twisted the lizard while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, broken-backed, on the turf... The man turned from it, flung himself at the feet of the Burning One, and embraced them. When he rose I thought his face shone with tears, but it may have been only the liquid love and brightness which flowed from him.”

The pain is excruciating, but it doesn’t last. Even more important it changes him, making him a more heavenly man.

What’s this mean for us? Let Isaiah’s imagery speak: Our cleaning will burn. At some point or another it will hurt. First it hurt the one who bled for us: Christ. But it will hurt us as well, as we take on the life of Christ by putting to death our old selves. Sanctification isn’t always a fun process, but it’s the process we submit to to burn out the final traces of uncleanliness. And like Isaiah, this isn’t something we do to ourselves, but we allow to be done to us. So we listen to the voice of God, obey the voice of God, and submit to the sufferings which will come through that obedience—whether they are spiritual (putting sin to death), social, physical, etc.

BB Quotes & Illustrations

“Many are called but few chose to be chosen.”

OSWALD CHAMBERS

Read Chapter 11 of *The Great Divorce*, the story of the man, the lizard, and the Burning One. (It’s stinkin’ great.)

PASCAL’S STORY:

French mathematician and physicist Blaise Pascal, though raised during the Enlightenment and being brilliant in his own right, found reason alone inadequate: “Reason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it.”

He concluded, “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know at all”—a statement that became the chief critique of Rationalism and the starting point for a defense of the Christian faith that still influences people today.

On November 23, 1654, Pascal had a special experience with God, he wrote:

*“From about half-past ten in the evening
until about half-past twelve ... FIRE ...
The GOD of Abraham, the GOD of Isaac, the GOD of Jacob,
not of the philosophers and learned.
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.”*

Pascal wrote this experience down on a piece of parchment and had it sewed inside the lapel of his coat which he always wore. It was not discovered until his death in 1662. Imagine Pascal reaching up to feel that piece of parchment in the lapel of his coat—perhaps daily, perhaps in times of stress—and being reassured of God’s presence.

! Three Main Points

1. God is Holy. We are not. Unless God bridges the gap between himself and us, it will continue to exist.
2. God’s call is there but we must respond to his offer. This is the turning point: whether we respond in the manner of Isaiah, or remain unclean, unrepentant.
3. We need to find the places in our lives that need the touch of live coals, for we need to be made clean. (While remembering that “your guilt is taken away” and “you’ve been atoned for.”).

? Discussion Questions

- How do we see Christ in this passage? If all Scripture points to him, how does this passage point to him?
- Isaiah already believed in the God of the Bible but obviously needs a deeper experience of God for more life change to take place. This passage affirms that God is willing to meet that need by his grace. Are you like Isaiah in this respect, believing but not changing? How would God’s response in Isaiah’s life look in yours?
- The Seraphim have six wings. One pair is used to fly. What do you think is symbolized by using the other wings to cover their faces and feet? What do we learn about God? What do we learn about us? How should this symbol instruct our worship, behavior, words, attitudes?
- Isaiah recognizes that he has “unclean lips.” When you think about your life, what stands out as most obviously unclean? Isaiah’s unclean-ness was an obstacle to his responding to God’s call. What might your “unclean”-ness be keeping you from?

- But uncleanness isn't the end of Isaiah's story. How does God remedy Isaiah's unclean lips? What do you think God might want to use to remedy the unclean parts of your life or heart or mind?
- What does Isaiah's experience with the hot coal teach us about how this cleansing process might look in our own lives?
- How should an understanding of God's holiness affect how we think about God and approach him? How do we picture God in our mind? What are your intuitions about God? Is he just a fluffy bunny rabbit thrilled about everything about you? (Obviously don't frame it this way, but this is what you're trying to tease out.)
- Isaiah in the presence of a Holy God cries out, "Woe is me, I am undone...". Why is he filled with despair? What does it mean to be "undone?" How does our sin "undo" us? How does the presence of the Holy God undo us? Have you ever had this experience?
- Why do you think this passage described the experience of Isaiah's cleansing as a burning coal? What does this image bring out symbolically about cleansing? (Tease out the insights from the encounter: think about where it occurred on his body, why it was burning/live, how it would have felt, etc. and discuss what that means for our proverbial cleansings.)
- As we read his story of feeling the overpowering "Otherness" of God and consequent utter unworthiness, does your heart say, "me, too, Lord, me, too?" Are there those of us who read this encounter and realize we don't feel (or haven't ever felt) how Isaiah feels; we aren't bowled over by our own uncleanness? Is this experience necessary to be a Christian?
- Is fixating on our own uncleanness, our own brokenness and sinfulness a healthy thing? How do we stay humble and acknowledge the holiness of God without devolving into harmful self-deprecation?

Application & Practice

This week will look a little different, but we want to have a diversity of [ways] we apply what we're learning. So we want to invite you to reflect on your own Isaiah-like call this week:

Set aside some time this week with God. Read this Isaiah story again (aloud) and listen. Then break down and write out Isaiah's story in these five aspects:

- 1. Revelation:** What was the revelation of God Isaiah received?
- 2. Conviction:** What was the response this revelation provoked in Isaiah?
- 3. Cleansing:** How did the Lord cleanse his iniquity and remove his guilt?
- 4. Calling/Response:** What was the call and how did Isaiah react?
- 5. Commissioning/Message:** How would you summarize the message Isaiah was to give? What did the people need to hear?

Now, continuing to write, prayerfully breaking down your own experience with God. Ask the Lord to help you remember how he has met you at each of these stages.

- 1. Revelation:** When did you really realize that the Lord is wholly Other?
- 2. Conviction:** When/How did it dawn on you that you were a sinner in the hands of a Holy God?

3. **Cleansing:** How have you been cleansed, forgiven and at peace with God? How are you currently being cleaned?
4. **Calling/Response:** Is there someone in your life that you feel spiritually burdened for? Someone you know was a key person God used to reach you and draw you near to him. You are probably his key person to reach someone else!
5. **Commissioning/Message:** What word of encouragement does someone need to hear or act of kindness they need to see in order for you to be faithful in opening a door for them to see God better?

As students are working on this, you may realize there are some gaps in your story. Join the crowd! Many college students are in the middle of these stages or just getting started with God. But isn't good to know that God had a plan for your life?! His plan and calling for you will be as unique as you are. But we have Isaiah's story and others in the Bible to give us a model and hope.

Blessing on your time alone with God. May you return to that well to drink deeply and often.



Going Deeper

Podcast: *"The Gospel & Your Self"* – Tim Keller

Book: *The Great Divorce* – C. S. Lewis

Book: *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George Hunter III