

A glimpse of reality

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[0 : 00] Well friends, turn with me back to Isaiah chapter 6, that's page 571 in your visitor's Bible, 571. And as we do, we'll have a moment of prayer.

Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the wonderful words of Isaiah. And we pray, Lord, that as we open them up now, you would open up our hearts to understand them.

We pray, Lord, that as we are led to you through your word, that you alone would be high and lifted up.

We ask it for the sake of your son, Jesus. Amen. Most young boys, most young boys who can let their imaginations run wild must go through a brief period when they want to be an astronaut.

My space career began when I was about seven years old, and my parents had bought me a big picture book of the solar system. Now, it was a short-lived career. It lasted maybe five weeks.

[1 : 12] But I spent most of those five weeks hunting out for new constellations or black holes, all that sort of thing. But even with that incredible picture book, I couldn't keep interested for all that long.

Everything seemed slightly distant, just disappointingly small. You see, what I needed was a telescope. Something that let me see more detail.

Just how beautiful, how big space really was. Well, I think chapter six is Isaiah's Hubble Space Telescope.

This is the chapter that expands Isaiah's view of God. Let him see just how big, how awesomely holy, how incredibly powerful and glorious God really is.

And let's Isaiah see who is the true king and judge of Israel. And chapter six also focuses the telescope on himself, on all of us.

[2 : 17] It lets us see what we really look like next to that true king. And that glimpse of reality, that peek into the heart of the universe that the Lord gives Isaiah will shape his whole life and ministry.

That glimpse of reality lies behind the central challenge of the book of Isaiah, to put our trust in this true king, not any other impressive military might or political power.

I think the question at the heart of this book comes in chapter 36. It's a question bellowed at Hezekiah, king of Judah, by an invading general. On what do you rest this trust of yours?

You see, Judah relied on anything but this true king. On Egypt, on Babylon, even on their own useless rulers.

But in the year that one of the proudest of Judah's kings dies, Isaiah was confronted by the true king, the true ruler of Israel.

[3 : 30] And that glimpse of that true king blew open his understanding of that king's character. So take a peek through the telescope, says Isaiah.

Take a glimpse of reality. The truth is terrifying, yet wonderful. Let's look then at what happened to Isaiah the day the Lord commissioned him as a prophet.

The day the Lord blew wide open his picture of God's holiness and his sinfulness. And let's pray the Lord does the same for us as we look. Now it's a big chapter.

It's here to give us a glimpse of big truth. So we're going to cut it up into five short headings. And we'll start in verses 1 to 4 with a prophet confronted.

A prophet confronted. I don't think we can sense the true shock of what confronts poor Isaiah unless we read our chapter straight after the five that have come before it.

[4 : 33] You see, chapter 6, our chapter starts with a massive contrast. It's as if the whole book changes gear. In verses 1 to 4, Isaiah is brought face to face with the living God.

And the sheer majesty and holiness of the sight terrifies him. The whole thrust of the first half of this chapter is to expand his vision of God's holiness and our sinfulness.

And what makes the impact so big, so truly shocking, is the contrast between this sight and everything that's come in the first five chapters of Isaiah's prologue.

So far in that prologue, Isaiah's been confronting us with the unholiness, the unholiness of Israel, God's people. Just travel with me very quickly through that prologue.

And as we read a few excerpts, just try and sense the tone of the prophet's message so far. He begins in chapter 1 with the Creator's indictment, his prosecution of his creatures.

[5 : 41] Look at chapter 1, verse 4. Ah, sinful nation, laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers.

They have forsaken the Lord, despised the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged. Or flick forward to chapter 3, chapter 3, verse 8.

Their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. What about chapter 5?

Whereas I think this first song about the vineyard, the carefully tended and protected people that the Lord God had chosen. But in verse 7 of chapter 5, when God looked to that vineyard for fruit, he sees nothing but bloodshed.

He looked for righteousness and sees nothing but outcry. And then, suddenly, in chapter 6, from those fierce words and from a picture of a people as unholy as could possibly be, Isaiah is confronted with the Holy God.

[7 : 04] And there's a second contrast in these opening verses. Isaiah dates his terrifying vision to the year King Uzziah died, verse 1.

King Uzziah of Judah would always be remembered as the king who let success get to his head, who grew so proud, thought he was so good, that God would just have to accept him.

He was a very effective king. 2 Chronicles 26 tells us all about his life, how he built up and fortified Jerusalem, organized strategically brilliant engineering works, and led Judah to fantastic military victories.

You see, as political saviors go, Uzziah seemed to be the real deal. But it made him proud. So proud that he stormed into the temple, without a priest, and burned incense on the altar.

You see, little King Uzziah thought he was so big, so successful, that God would just have to accept him, his way. Well, of course, he was badly mistaken.

[8 : 16] And God punished his pride by striking him with leprosy. So from the glory of the king's palace, Uzziah died an outcast.

So Uzziah seems to be making a very deliberate point by dating his passage so precisely. In the year that proud King Uzziah dies, the Lord confronts Uzziah with a vision of the true king.

Verse 5, the king, the Lord of hosts. And there's no mistaking who Uzziah is facing. He's the king of heaven, verse 1, high and lifted up, exalted, sitting in his rightful place, on the throne, from which he'll judge and rule his whole creation.

And if poor Uzziah isn't struck enough by the God who confronts him in these first few verses, the holy one, the true king, then the seraphim are there to drive it home.

Seraphim literally mean the burning ones. But terrifying, though they may seem, these burning angels aren't mentioned to draw our attention towards themselves. The seraphim are mentioned to draw our attention towards the king, the one sitting on the throne, to expand our vision of him even more.

[9 : 43] So by looking at them, by looking at these seraphim, we learn how to respond when we're confronted by the king, like Uzziah. Just look how reverent they are, covering their faces, because they can't even bear to look on this king's glory.

And listen, listen to what these seraphim have to say. It might be short, just two lines, but it's sung so loudly that the foundations of heaven itself shake.

And their two short lines of praise focus the telescope squarely on the king. Look how much is packed in to what this seraph thinks. He praises God's nature.

His nature is holy, holy, holy. Nothing in his whole creation is as holy as this king.

That threefold repetition is the Hebrew way of saying that something is as true as it possibly can be. It's like a child struggling to reach a big enough number and ending up having to invent a whole new one.

[10 : 55] A bazillion. This king is a bazillion times holy. Holy. That's his nature. And then he praises God's name. This holy, holy, holy God is the Lord.

Capital letters. Yahweh. The covenant God who's made himself known to his people. Who's revealed himself to them in person. So yes, he's the God of heaven, verse 1, high and lifted up. And, he's the God of his people. Yahweh, the covenant Lord who gets involved with his creation. Next, the seraph praises God's power.

He's the Lord of hosts. His power is all the armies of heaven standing by at this king's command. And, there's more. He praises God's dominion.

The whole earth. The whole earth, sings the seraph, is full of this God's glory. In other words, his dominion, his control, extends to absolutely every corner of the world he made.

[12:09] That's the king who confronts our prophet. No wonder it made an impact on him. No wonder Isaiah had a favourite name for this king. The Holy One of Israel.

That's the name Isaiah uses 25 times in this book. It's only used five times anywhere else in the Old Testament. That's the mark that this confrontation with this Holy God left on Isaiah's writing.

The Holy One of Israel. And, no wonder Isaiah reacts the way he does. In verse 5, Isaiah makes the only possible response to a bazillion times holy king.

He understands that if God is holy, he is hellish. If God is the creator, then he is completely created. And if that's a true king, he's not a subject, but a traitor.

So, secondly, in verse 5, a prophet confesses. A prophet confesses. Isaiah confesses that he's lost.

[13:19] In fact, that word's a little weak. Some of you might have an NIV. Isaiah says, woe to me, for I am ruined. Ruined. That's what he fears. Not just lost, but utterly ruined.

And he gives two reasons why. Two reasons which I think are a little strange. He's ruined because he's unclean. And because he's seen the bazillion times clean God.

Are they strange reasons? Why does the prophet think he's so unclean? For what we would possibly see as one of the lightest of sins.

He's a man of unclean lips. And he's worried about something that we all too often don't think of at all. The king, the lord of hosts. If that's surprising to us, then it's probably because we've still got too small a view of God's absolute holiness.

Too light a view of our own awful sinfulness. You see, holiness means much more than simply being good. It means that God is utterly other than the created order.

[14:36] He's transcendent, above and beyond the world he made. And it means he's pure, completely untainted by sin and corruption, utterly, implacably opposed to all that's wrong.

evil. And that exposes the awful truth about us, doesn't it? As I have confronted by the creator, by the giver of life, and what he fears is death.

It's right to find that surprising. It isn't natural. It's not how things should be. that's the effect of confronting filthiness with purity.

Of confronting a condemned man with the eternal, immortal God. You see, when an unclean heart meets the righteous God, the result must be a profound sense of complete inadequacy.

Now, why do I say unclean heart, and not simply lips? Because that is exactly where the Lord Jesus tells us the root of the problem lies.

[15:56] Remember these words in Mark chapter 7. It's what comes out of a man that defiles him. Evil thoughts, deceit, slander.

All of those the Lord Jesus tell us come from the heart. So if Isaiah's lips are unclean, then he realises the problem goes far deeper.

His very nature makes him unfit for God's presence. That's what uncleanness was all about. All the Levitical laws of the Old Testament taught Isaiah.

Just think of some of those lip sins the Lord Jesus talks about. Deceit. slander. Do we think of those as telling little fibs or a bit of innocent office gossip?

Or do we see them as a sign of a sick heart, a filthy lips, a heart that cuts us off from the Lord, our King? That's how Isaiah sees them.

[17:02] The crushing understanding that hits Isaiah as soon as he sees the King is that he is as unclean as all the people he's written about in those past five chapters.

Not because he compares himself to them, but because he compares himself to the King sitting on the throne. How can he possibly preach the Gospel to God's people?

You see, Isaiah sees the seraphs praising the King, and he's forced to look into his own heart, and then the heart of all his people. And as he turns his gaze back to the seraphs, he realizes that he can never join in their praise.

How can he, with a mouth that pours out all the filth of his heart, sing praises to a bazillion times holy King? But amazingly, no sooner does Isaiah confess his own unworthiness, then God provides a way for him to sing.

So thirdly, in verses six to seven, we have a prophet made clean. A prophet made clean. Isaiah's words must be those of a forgiven man.

[18:25] He has to be in a right relationship with his God if he's to represent him to the people. Now we know, of course, that there's only ever been one way to be made clean, to be put right with God.

All the pictures of the Old Testament point us to that one true source of forgiveness. Think of all those pictures of sacrifice and atonement.

They point us, of course, to the one sacrifice that opens up the way for us, unclean people, into God's presence. So before God can use this unclean prophet to proclaim his gospel, he gives him another picture.

Another picture to show him that he truly is restored, made clean. The seraph takes a burning coal from the altar, a place that points to God's perfect sacrifice, and he touches it to Isaiah's unclean lips.

He gives him the symbol to be sure that he really trusts that his sin has been dealt with, to stoop down to his simple understanding. And because God never separates symbols or pictures from his word, the seraph explains it to him in verse seven.

[19:52] Your guilt is taken away, Isaiah. Your sin atoned for. So purity came by a burning coal from God's altar, saving grace flowing from God alone.

The coal wasn't magic. It couldn't just rub out Isaiah's sins any more than any of the pictures of the Old Testament could, the sacrifices and so on. But it showed him beyond doubt that his confidence came from God's chosen way of dealing with human sin.

So of course that picture of the coal points us right to the cross, doesn't it? To the sacrifice that comes from God's altar. And then the promises preached to Isaiah by the seraph give us certainty in the power of God's cleansing.

well how does Isaiah respond to that wonderful grace in just the same way as the seraphs with service?

In verse 8 he hears that the Lord needs a messenger and Isaiah is now desperate to please the God who's made him clean. So in verses 8 to 12, fourthly, we have a prophet commissioned.

[21:16] A prophet commissioned. That question in verse 8 is almost playful isn't it? Whom shall I send? Ask the Lord who's just called a prophet into his presence and made his lips fit to bear his words.

But he does ask the question. God allows us to respond to his grace. C.S. Lewis wrote a few science fiction books.

They're not as read as his other books. Maybe they should be. But in his second one, Perilandia, which is a book set on a fictional paradise, he talks of the animals as creatures that are so keen, so delighted to serve the king, that if he'd only asked them, they'd all stand on their heads.

How much more a prophet is being made clean by God's grace. Look how different his words are now. His words in verse 8, to that desperate confession in verse 5.

That's the power of God's restoring grace. Isaiah uses the Bible's classic words for an obedient servant responding to God's gracious call.

[22:32] One day I'd love the chance to preach through the here am I's of the Bible. It's a phrase that pops up again and again when God's servants respond in faith.

Even, even when they know it will cost them everything. Think back to Genesis 22, and here I am was the answer that Abraham gave three times when he was put to the supreme test of faithful obedience, sacrificing his own son.

Or how about Moses when he was called to the burning bush? Here am I. And through Samuel and right through to the New Testament, it was the answer given by Ananias when he was called to set aside his fear and restore the sight of Saul of Tarsus.

So Isaiah answers with those words, here am I, because he's eager to respond to God's grace. He's been accepted by God.

So he's desperate to serve, even though it will mean rejection by everybody else. Because for Isaiah, just like Abraham and Moses, those words, here am I, meant a costly response.

[23 : 57] Look at the message he's given to preach. It's suddenly a difficult one, isn't it? Isaiah's commissioned to proclaim God's word, and he's told that rejection is just what he'll get.

And Isaiah had to go on delivering this message, not just for a year or two, but for something like 50 years. It was a message of judgment passed on that throne in heaven to be executed on earth. So in verses 9 to 10, Isaiah's told that even as he preaches the gospel, it will have the effect of hardening hearts. even as he proclaims God's word, people will become more and more obstinate in their refusal to accept it.

And then in verses 11 and 12, the consequences of their rejection in the end will be devastating punishment. Judgment here on earth in history.

That picture in verse 12 is of the devastating Babylonian invasion. It's still about 200 years off. Cities and countryside laid waste and people either slain or deported.

[25 : 14] Maybe that message seems a bit difficult for us to take. Maybe it seems painfully harsh of God, but he is clear that the judgment fits the crime perfectly.

The responsibility lies entirely on us. Judah received exactly the same gracious offer as Isaiah himself. Remember those famous words from chapter 1.

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Judah heard those words and rejected them.

Unlike Isaiah, they made no great confession of their uncleanness. And so verse 9 emphasizes their rejection of God's word, their human responsibility.

And then verse 10 shows God's sovereign judgment, hardening their hearts further and leaving them to the consequences of their own stubbornness.

[26 : 24] Well, how would we respond? If we were given Isaiah's message to preach, not just for the occasional moment of boldness, but for a lifetime of hard work and painful rejection.

Chapter 6 teaches us not to give up, even if we spend our entire lives witnessing to our friends and our colleagues, even our children, without seeing any fruit.

What perseverance Isaiah must have had. the Lord says to Isaiah, verses 9 to 12, don't give up.

Even if you can't see any benefit at all, just obey my commission and trust the consequences to my sovereign judgment.

And of course the Lord says just the same to you and me. We are the aroma of Christ, says Paul, a fragrance of life to some and death to others.

Who is sufficient? Who is sufficient for these things? The answer, of course, is that none of us are sufficient, but the Lord is.

[27 : 40] Look carefully at verse 8. Look who Isaiah is being sent by. Us. Plural. He's doing the Father's work.

Whom shall I send? He's doing it through the Son's work, made clean by a burning coal from God's altar. The only way God will allow.

And of course, Isaiah will persevere in that hard job, in the power of the Spirit. They are sufficient.

So even in rejection of the message, God's servants can praise him.

Even when we're rejected, we can praise God for hardening hearts. His bazillion times big justice.

But don't miss that question in verse 11.

How long, O Lord? Even trusting in God's sovereign judgment doesn't give us license to be callous in our witness, our evangelism.

[28 : 45] Even while he fiercely denounces them, Isaiah never sets aside his concern for his people. So if lesson number one for our ministry, our witness, is to persevere, trusting in God's judgment, then lesson number two is to have hearts filled with compassion, compassion for the lost.

How long, O Lord? Notice that God blinds their eyes lest they turn to him and be healed. So like Isaiah then, we need a right view of God's absolute holiness and our awful sinfulness.

And that right view must lead us humbly, eagerly, to obedient boldness in proclaiming his word.

That must be our reaction to this passage, to respond to God's grace with the same eagerness as Isaiah, with grateful obedience that comes from that brief glimpse of stark reality.

Well, that's all very well, but what does it mean? Let me just suggest three questions to think through tonight. Firstly, quickly, the obvious ones. Question one, is my response acceptable?

Will God look at me with pleasure? Or does everything I do just look filthy? The answer to that must depend on what you've understood as you've looked through Isaiah's telescope.

[30 : 27] Whether you've been confronted with the King, the Lord of the Scriptures, whether you've realised your own unworthiness and confessed that to the Lord.

if you're not yet a believer, then that has to be the big question to think through tonight. But, if you have been made clean by Christ, then the other obvious question is this, is my response adequate? And the answer to that must always be no, of course not. It can never be enough, never adequate to pay back what Christ has done for us.

Praise God, that isn't what he asks of us. But there's a third question, and I'm addressing Christians here, because for me at least this is where the passage starts to sting a little bit.

Is my response appropriate? This is where having a perspective like Isaiah's matters so much. Is my response to God's wonderful grace appropriate?

[31 : 37] what's your attitude as you serve Christ's church? Just think of Isaiah's attitude in verse 8 as he answers God with those famous words.

Don Carson puts it like this, that answer, here I am, is not the cry of a hero. It's not the cry of a hero, it's the petition of the pardoned.

when you respond to God's grace with obedient service, do you do it as a heroic hero or as a humbled servant?

I don't know about you, but it doesn't take me long to forget how I got here. Yes, I know I'm saved by grace, but my default position is to think of myself as the hero.

So much pride can creep into our Christian service, but that attitude can only lead one way.

[32 : 41] Think of proud King Isaiah. You see, before long, the hero will always start to think of himself as the martyr. Maybe we've washed a few extra dishes or given up precious time to encourage a friend, and that subtle edge of resentment starts to creep up.

But there's no room for that in Isaiah's thinking, is there? Well, I've promised five headings, and the final one comes from the last six words of the passage.

Yes, Isaiah's response to God's grace would come at a painful cost, but he is given reason to hope. So in the last verse, we see a prophet consoled, a prophet consoled.

It may not look like much, but Isaiah is told that only a remnant will remain in the land after exile, and even those few survivors will be like the stump of a tree.

Even they will be burned again in judgment. But a stump can one day produce a new shoot. that stump, the remnant of God's chosen people are the holy seed.

[33 : 59] Verse 13. So not only does God promise Isaiah that a tiny group of survivors will come through his judgment, but that from them regrowth will come.

That holy seed or offspring, maybe that's a simpler word, you'll see that in the footnotes. it hints, doesn't it, of the covenant the Lord made with David, right back in Israel's glory days.

The Lord promised David that he'd raise up his seed or his offspring after him and establish the throne of his kingdom forever. You see, Judah is promised a true king one day, a righteous king, the holy seed.

Not like proud Isaiah, the leper, but the very same pure and glorious king seated on that throne in heaven. And to be absolutely sure we've understood the promise, Isaiah develops it for us in chapter 11.

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

[35 : 25] Judgment, fierce and deserved though it was, clears the ground for new growth. Maybe that's something for us to remember today.

If the church seems to depart from God's word on such a massive scale, judgment clears the ground for new growth. it cleared the ground for the Lord Jesus, the holy seed.

But lastly, remember this too, dull hearts and heavy ears for what even the Lord himself faced. It was those verses that John quoted from in chapter 12 of his gospel as the Lord Jesus began to fix his eyes firmly on the cross.

Some would receive his words, others would reject them, but nevertheless, the Lord himself gave everything he had. And then of course he gave his own life to make us clean.

So however hard the cost, let's respond the same way as Isaiah. let's expand our view of the Lord's absolute holiness as well as our awful sinfulness.

[36 : 45] And as we think about what it cost the Lord to reconcile the two, let's answer like Isaiah with obedient boldness. Here I am, Lord.

Amen. Amen.