

A Hard Call

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now for our reading this morning, and Bob is continuing the series that he recently began in this prophet of Isaiah, which you'll find in the Old Testament about the middle of your Bibles.
- If you have one of our church visitor's Bibles, I think it's page 571, and we've reached this morning Isaiah chapter 6, which at least the first part of the chapter is a well-known and familiar passage, but it follows on, of course, from that long and very solemn passage we read last week about the devastated vineyard of the Lord, the people and the land of Israel.
- That's the context that Isaiah saw this extraordinary vision. So we begin at chapter 6, verse 1, in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up, and the train, the hem of his robe filled the temple.
- Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings. With two he covered his face. With two he covered his feet. And with two he flew.
- And one called 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 threshold shook at the voice of him who called.
- [1 : 3 0] And the house was filled with smoke. And I said, Woe is me, for I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.
- For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.
- And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.
- And 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.
- And he said, Go and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.
- [2 : 3 3] Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.
- Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
- And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.
- The holy seed is its stump. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Now, could I ask you to have our Bibles open, please, at that passage on page 571, and let's have a moment of prayer.
- Using again the words we've just sung, voice of God, prophetic spirit, speak to every heart today, to encourage or prohibit urging action or delay.

- [4 : 09] Clear the vagueness which impedes us. Come, enlighten mind and soul, and through Jesus Christ who leads us, teach the truth that makes us whole.
- This is our prayer, our Father. Amen. Amen. I think I've lost count of the number of times I've heard this passage read at ordinations and inductions.
- Almost always stopping at verse 8. Here am I. Send me. Now, that's terribly convenient. If I stop at here am I.
- Send me. Then I can write the agenda. I can say what I'm to be sent for. Here am I, Lord. Send me to be popular. Here am I.
- Send me to be successful. Here am I. Send me to be a celebrity. Here am I. Send me. Never to offend anybody. Always to say things that people will love and make everybody happy.
- [5 : 18] I'm afraid it's not like that. This is a hard calling, which is our title for today. When Isaiah confronted the Lord in the temple after these five chapters, which, of course, are the situation which he preached.
- And then he had this awe-inspiring vision. There are two things by way of introduction. First of all, the time that he saw the Lord. Now, you'll notice the precise date.
- It doesn't say, as I was walking along a country lane, I was zapped by a vision. It doesn't say, as I was sitting among the Jew, wonderful thoughts came into my head.
- No, a specific date, specific time in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. Just as many of the other prophetic visions, Ezekiel, for example, in some of his very bizarre and strange visions, dates them precisely.
- God spoke to Isaiah. God met Isaiah. In the year that King Uzziah died, Uzziah had been one of the most successful and popular of the kings of Judah.
- [6 : 32] Read about him in 2 Chronicles 26. Indeed, the chronicle talks about how he recalled David. He won back much of the land that earlier kings had lost.
- How he recalled Solomon. After his conquest, he built up a time of peace and prosperity. Wonderful story. And then comes the chilling phrase, He was marvelously helped until he became strong.
- He was marvelously helped until he became strong. And once Uzziah started depending on that strength, depending on his successes, then things went badly wrong and he ended a leper.
- He had reigned for 52 years. A long reign. And now he's gone. The throne is empty. And the growing menace of Assyria makes it even more alarming.
- And it's at that time that the prophet, thinking sadly of the departed king and the empty throne, sees a throne which can never be emptied, sees a lord who can never abdicate and who will never die.
- [7 : 47] In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the lord. I saw a greater throne. Then the place. I saw the lord.
- The train of his robe filled the temple. The temple where heaven touches earth. And where God meets his people. But also the temple in the Old Testament often means the whole world.
- God and throne and the throne of the universe. And the whole universe is his temple. God meets his people. And yet the chapter is dominated by death, is it not?
- The dying king, the prophet and the nation under the sentence of death. The just sentence of death, as we've read about in chapters 1 to 5, there is darkness, there is doom, there is judgment.

And so this great chapter is a kind of hinge, looking back to the darkness and judgment of chapters 1 to 5, and the hope of Emmanuel, which is to come in the next chapter.

[8 : 47] That's the situation then. In the year that King Uzziah died, says Isaiah, I saw the lord. A real dateable event, and yet opening up onto a much bigger and larger vision.

And there are three movements in the chapter. First of all, confronting holiness. This is a terrifying experience, a life-changing experience.

You know, sometimes people talk as if the vision of God, as if seeing God, would be happy. Rather unfortunate 19th century hymn, based on this passage, says, bright the vision, that delighted, once the eye of Judas seer, sweet the countless tongues united, to entrench the prophet's ear.

Delighted, Isaiah was shaking in terror. Entrenched, he was trembling, he was terrified, he's in the middle of an earthquake. And seeing Yahweh enthroned, above all the powers, he felt small, he felt dirty, it wasn't fun.

It didn't make his hands clap, it made his knees clap. This was a terrifying experience. And I think there are two things here. First of all, there is holiness enthroned.

[10 : 05] How can God, long ago said, said Solomon, live in temples? The heaven, the heaven of heavens, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built.

You'll notice, it's only the train, the hem of his robe, that fills the temple. As he's seated on this gigantic throne, towering over the universe, only the hem of his robe, fills the temple.

And he is surrounded by the seraphim, the burning ones, which is what the word means. And fire is the symbol of God's presence, symbol of judgment. The end of Genesis 3, a flaming sword, turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

And then in Exodus 3, it's a symbol, not just of judgment, but of blessing, as Moses is invited into that blazing holiness.

And so, the seraphim are a kind of visual, a kind of visual embodiment of God's holiness. With two, they were covering, each had six, two covering their face, covering their feet, and with two, they were flying.

[11 : 17] This is continual worship and continual serving. What is it they sing? Holy, holy, holy. Now, in English, we would tend to say holy, holier, holiest, or holy, more holy, and most holy.

But in Hebrew, in Hebrew, it wants to emphasize something. It repeats the word. Like, for a time I mentioned, Solomon the temple, when he talks about the massive gold that Solomon used, simply repeats the word, gold, gold.

But this is the only place where there's a threefold repetition. Holy, holy, holy. This means that there is no holiness anywhere, except in God.

Uniquely true of God, as they sing this, holy, holy, holy. And holiness here is enthroned. That's what, that's why, that is why Isaiah is so terrified.

But holiness is also revealed. The whole earth, they sing, is full of his glory. In other words, the holiness is not simply filling the temple, it's filling the whole earth.

[12 : 29] Now, glory, in a sense, is visible holiness. The word glory comes from the verb that means to be heavy, to be solid, to be real. See what the Lord is saying?

Isaiah, the most real truth about the universe is the Lord and his holiness. Interesting, the opposite of this is the Hebrew word hevel, which means a puff of wind, often used of idols.

This is no pipe dream. The veil is lifted for a moment, and Isaiah looks straight into heaven, and he sees that the heaven and earth are filled with the glory of God.

You see, vision isn't seeing what's not there. Vision is seeing everything that's there. And occasionally, the Lord allows the veil to be lifted.

And he does so here, as he did when Elisha, the prophet, was trapped in the Syrian town of Dothan. and he prayed, and the visible hosts of God, the Lord of hosts.

[13 : 36] Now, you see the point at a time of menace and of threats. The great Assyrian armies are rampaging through the Middle East. How on earth can an empty throne and a rather small and insignificant kingdom stand up to this?

only because they have faith in the Lord of hosts, the armies of heaven. Much later in the book, in chapters 37 and 38, the great king Hezekiah is to trust in that king against the hosts of Assyria.

And, as the Lord reveals himself, verse 4, the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called. This is a kind of earthquake, rather like Sinai, as the Lord descends in glory and power on Sinai.

And, as he reveals himself in the temple, there is an earthquake. There is a shaking. We saw this a few weeks ago in Haggai chapter 2 as well. The Lord says, I will shake the earth.

This is the God of Sinai. This is the God who revealed himself to Moses. And, you see how important that is? Isaiah, like Jeremiah and a later generation, surrounded by false prophets who are saying different things.

[14 : 54] This is showing to Isaiah that the God who revealed himself in the temple is the God of Moses, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, confronting holiness.

I wonder if we've lost the sense of that, have we? Now, I know, of course, that in the past, very often, still some people identify holiness and sanctity with robes and choirs and Gothic buildings.

And we quite rightly fear the deadness of formality, don't we? What about the deadness of informality? We don't simply bring in the Holy Spirit by behaving in a particular way.

The point is, this is what God is always like. This is the Old Testament, isn't it? What about Revelation chapter 1? The Apostle John on the island of Patmos sees a vision of the risen Lord and when I saw him, he said, I fell at his feet as though dead.

It was terrifying. Holiness is terrifying. Holiness is awesome. Awesome in the proper sense of that word, not the popular way it's used nowadays.

[16 : 07] So, that's the first movement. It leads on to the second movement, Confessing Sin, verses 5 to 7. Isn't it very interesting? This great vision, it's not so much the sense of insignificance and smallness, it's the sense of sinfulness.

That is what strikes Isaiah. How can an unholy human approach the eternal throne? How can Isaiah, sing with Charles Wesley, bold eye approach the eternal throne?

He certainly did not feel bold at this particular moment. This is a sense of sinfulness. And first of all, there is a sin which pollutes. Verse 5, Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

Notice the importance of this. Last week, Isaiah was saying, or the Lord was saying through Isaiah, Woe to those who join house to house. Woe to those who are indulging in iniquity.

Woe to those who call evil good. Isaiah does not say, Lord, they are unholy people. They deserve all that's coming to them. No, he joins with them.

[17 : 19] He's heard the pure worship of the seraphim. He's looked into the holiness of the Lord seated on his throne and he cannot join in that pure worship. And in particular, it's particularly galling for a prophet.

I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips. What does the prophet use? His voice. His lips. And so, the prophet realizes the truth.

Not only are the people guilty, he is guilty as well. That's the only way we can avoid judgmentalism, by the way, when we're presenting the gospel. We must teach judgment.

But we must teach it in such a way as to show that we are under judgment as well. You know, sometimes in evangelicalism there is a kind of glib and smug satisfaction that would make a self-respecting Pharisee blush.

We really need to realize that we, all of us, are sinful. All of us are guilty. All of us need to confess our sins. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, says the Apostle John.

[18 : 34] You see, this is not a new revelation. This is a revelation of what is always and eternally true. And the prophet recognizes I'm guilty as well.

There is no way in my unholiness I can approach the eternal throne. How are my chains going to fall off and my heart be free? So you see, the sin which pollutes is now dealt with by the fire which purifies.

God had revealed himself in fire surrounded by the burning ones. He takes the initiative in revealing himself and now he takes the initiative in dealing with sin. And surely the whole gospel is here.

One of the seraphim flew to me, obviously ordered by the Lord. The seraphim would not do this out of it. He's only having in his hand a burning coal.

They had taken with tongs from the altar. The burning coal, the anger of God, the destructive fire coming from the altar. The place where the sacrifice is burned and yes, the place where that sacrifice opens the way for unholy people to approach a holy God.

[19 : 47] See, this is the gospel, is it not? Not surprising that Isaiah is sometimes referred to as the fifth evangelist. This is what happens when every time a sinner comes to the Lord.

The burning fire which destroys is the fire which purifies. And you'll notice that this has touched your lips. The very point where the prophet feels his need and feels his sinfulness, this has touched your lips.

And the place where Isaiah knew that he needed forgiveness. Guilt, it has, your guilt is taken away.

The guilt is the inner attitude, the inner sinfulness. And sin, and your sin is atoned for. Sin is the way in which that expresses itself.

Now, these different words for sin, we sin because we have an inner attitude, is atoned for. Taken away, the psalmist said, as far as the east is from the west, your sins are removed.

[20 : 54] Atoned for, covered by paying a debt. Jesus paid it all. As the old hymn says, there was no other good enough to pay the price for sin.

And we still, of course, use the word cover in that sense. You have enough money to cover a particular debt. So, where is the answer to the terrible guilt and judgment of verses 1 to 5?

It's here at the altar where sinful humanity can gain an interest in the Savior's blood by grace which covers all our sin.

Confronting holiness, confessing sin, and thirdly, passage so often omitted, verses 8 to 13, called to tell others.

Verses 8 to 13, Now the Lord speaks and the prophet hears and responds. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

[21 : 56] The call which cannot be ignored. Now, us is one of the Old Testament foreshadowings of the Trinity because these words are applied to the Lord Jesus Christ himself in John 12 and to the Holy Spirit in Acts 28.

That doesn't mean that Isaiah had a well-developed doctrine of the Trinity. Of course he didn't. But if God is in three persons glorious Trinity and that's revealed in the New Testament, you'd expect there to be intimations of it in the Old Testament and this is one of them.

Now that is a special call to Isaiah and to coin a phrase we are not Isaiah but we have Isaiah's God and that call which comes to Isaiah comes to all of us.

Not to do the same things as Isaiah, not to have the same part in salvation history as he did, but to live lives that will reflect Christ and bring him to others.

This is an urgent call. You see, that's why the bright, the vision, the lighted and entranced and so on isn't really, isn't reflecting reality. The call of God is not like you've won a ticket to the Caribbean for two with all expenses paid and ten thousand pounds spending money.

[23 : 16] The call of God is much more like this. The call is to, the call is to a hard and difficult and often thankless task.

We have this, we have this strange passage verses nine to ten. The message which will be rejected. Let's just imagine this.

Go and tell these people and nobody's going to listen. This is pretty, this is pretty stern stuff and yet, this is the passage that the New Testament focuses on.

Use a number of significant places in Matthew chapter 13, for example, in the parable of the sower, Jesus says, this is what happens when the seed is sown.

Some seed will grow, some seed will not grow and that doesn't mean that we stop sowing the seed.

[24 : 14] This is the only message that will change people. This is the only message that will transform a sinner into a saint. This is the only message that will allow us to approach the eternal throne.

Yet many, by continual rejection, put themselves to the point of no return. It's not that God is unwilling to forgive, but that very often people, by persistent rejection, don't want to be forgiven.

And the reason they don't want to be forgiven is because they don't realize they need to be forgiven. That's why the whole sequence of thought here is so important. Seeing the holiness of God and the terrifying nature of our sin is the only way to be healed.

But it's a hard message to preach and it's a hard message to receive. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others.

Don't we imagine that means the Lord is saying, if you don't forgive others, I jolly well won't forgive you. No, it's saying something far more profound. If you don't forgive, then you'll get to a stage where you're incapable of receiving forgiveness.

[25 : 28] Somebody said to John Wesley, Wesley, I never sin, I never forgive. And Wesley replied, well, I hope you never sin. That is the point. We are sinners needing forgiveness.

And inevitably, Isaiah said, how long, O Lord? The Lord's answer is not immediately reassuring, he said, until the cities lie waste without inhabitants, houses without people, the land is a desolate waste.

In Isaiah's own lifetime, that was going to happen to the northern kingdom carried off to Assyria. And Isaiah, in his later chapters particularly, is going to prophesy of that exile which takes the people of God away from Judah.

Houses without people, the land, a desolate waste. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again. This is not a reassuring message in the immediate future, is it?

A call, a hard call, the message will be rejected. And yet, it doesn't end in gloom and darkness. Look at the last words of verse 13.

[26 : 43] Like a terebinth whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump. The tree will be cut down. The people will go into exile, but there will be a remnant.

There is life. There is life in this house of David. And indeed, there are going to be anticipations even in Isaiah's own lifetime when Hezekiah comes to the throne and people remember with excitement the great days of David.

Long after Isaiah's time when Josiah is to come to the throne, there are to be lights shining. There is to be a remnant. And later on in chapter 11, Isaiah is going to say, there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, the tree that's cut down.

A branch from his root shall bear fruit. This is going to happen. And there is to be a remnant from which and to which the Messiah will come.

He'll come from them. He is the descendant of David and he'll come to them. Read these wonderful chapters again in Luke 1 and 2 where a small number of people, Mary and Joseph, Zechariah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna waited for the hope of Israel.

[28 : 04] And in chapter 53, Isaiah, is going to develop this and tell us how Emmanuel, the king, the servant who is to come will bleed for Adam's helpless race.

You see, the gospel, even in the midst of darkness, still has life. It's a terrifying chapter. It needs to be because until we recognize how holy God is and how great our sin is, we're never going to be able to enjoy the hope at the end of the chapter.

That is the gospel according to Isaiah. That is the gospel according to the whole Bible. Let's pray. Father, we do not understand your ways.

In his mystery all, the immortal eyes, who can explore his strange design? In vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.

But, Lord, help us to rejoice in your salvation, confessing our sin and acknowledging your holiness so that in all the days of our life we may walk in your ways and honor you and your truth.

[29 : 21] And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.