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Vision of God

The year is right around 740 BC, the year Uzziah died. Uzziah’s leadership had been marked with success and glory. 2 Chronicles 26 tells us the king’s fame extended to the border of Egypt. He built towers, and he developed agriculture; he fielded an extensive army with advanced engines of war. Judah seemed to be in a very secure position under Uzziah. That was changing. Five years before Uzziah’s death, Tiglath-Pileser III ascended to the throne of Assyria, quickly defeating the other kingdoms of Mesopotamia and launching Assyria on a path to become one of the strongest empires ever known. By 740 BC, the shadow of Assyria had begun to stretch over the Levant. An Assyrian inscription boasts a victory by Tiglath-Pileser over Uzziah in this year of 740 BC. It is into this context of internal moral decay and external military danger, set up for us in chapters 1-5, that God reveals himself to this Jew of Jerusalem, Isaiah son of Amoz.

Isaiah’s vision is recorded in verses 1-6. The whole chapter is a mixture of prose narrative and poetry. The words spoken by God, by the angels, and by Isaiah, those are all poetic verse. I am addressing this text with hesitation because I know that I will not do justice to the experience that Isaiah is communicating to us. This was not something Isaiah saw with emotional objectiveness. Isaiah will be overwhelmed by his vision of God. I remember one time in our first apartment after Brenda and I had joined staff, I sat alone in our small living room spending devotional time with God. A praise CD played. I don’t remember the song. I remember being overwhelmed. I felt fear. I wouldn’t say I was afraid. It was not the power of God that was making me bow my head but the weight of His moral perfection. I did not think about it at the time. I was just having this experience of the awe of God. I felt His holiness. At the same time, I felt my sinfulness. In whatever way you may have felt something like that, the weighty or terrifying awe of God’s holy presence, try to tap into that feeling as you consider this vision that has pierced through Isaiah’s mind, through his heart, into his gut.

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the Temple. We will end this chapter with the people of Judah not seeing. We begin with Isaiah seeing. This is true sight. The Lord sits on a throne. We are not worried about Uzziah. We are not worried about Tiglath-Pileser. The Lord God sits on a throne. He rules over the affairs of men. His presence cannot be contained by the magnificent Temple of Solomon. Just the very end of His robe is enough to fill it. God is not alone.

² Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

Those are the words Isaiah has for himself. This is not about the people out there in a wicked society. This is the experience of the prophet. “I am a man of unclean lips. How can I speak for God? I can’t stand before God myself. I am the sinful one. My lips are unclean. Woe is me. I am cursed. I have broken Covenant. I am ruined.” A true vision of God reveals something about His glorious nature, which must also turn back on the one who experiences Him. The fig leaves are removed. He sees through. Nothing can hide the truth about our own sinfulness. To truly know God is to be personally undone. The false images, excuses, justifications, diminishment of sin that we have made in our own mind, it is all undone. We are ruined before the holiness of God. Songs about “I just did it my way” and poems about being “the captain of my own soul” is all revealed as moronic foolishness when you stand before God as He is. When you see the King, the Lord of hosts, you know without argument or doubt that the burning anger of His holy goodness must destroy you. And you know that it is right.

In this moment Isaiah sees himself as just another one of the wicked inhabitants of Judah, a man of unclean lips in the midst of a people of unclean lips. All the ruin Isaiah prophesied concerning the wicked in chapter 5 is now applied to him. He is the one who has taken for granted the grace of God. He is the one whose hypocrisy is revealed. He is the one who lacks compassion and love for the broken in society. There is a powerful message here for everybody who feels safe in church, pointing at the sinfulness of those outside of church. Is his sin as great as those around him? From a human perspective, no. If we want to argue the relative badness of different sins, the wicked of society have done much worse than Isaiah had done. But standing before the holy glory of God it does not matter one whit whether this person is worse than that person. Better or worse, who cares? In this moment Isaiah is only aware of his own sin, brought to light in the holy presence. He is a man of unclean lips, no different than the people. The people must die. He must die. As the nation descended into darkness at the end of chapter 5, Isaiah too, must be consumed, swallowed up by the gaping mouth of Sheol. And yet, he is not.

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ He touched my mouth *with it* and said,

“Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

Burning fire is always in the Bible a symbol of God’s wrath. But not here. God’s wrath must burn sin away. Here, that fire burns away only the sin, not the sinner. It is a purifying fire, touching the point where the man has realized his sinfulness. “I am a man of unclean lips...behold, this has touched your lips and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.” The two ideas presented here of what God has done with Isaiah’s sin are the same two ideas symbolized on the Day of Atonement instituted by God in Leviticus 16. The word “forgiven” that I’ve read here from my Bible translation is literally, “atoned.” Your sin is atoned for. To atone is to “cover” or to “satisfy” wrath. God’s presence hovered over the Ark of the Covenant in the innermost place of the Tabernacle. In that Holy of Holies, angels were depicted on the tent curtains and made to kneel on the lid to the Ark of the Covenant. The Covenant tablets God had given to Moses lay inside of the Ark. Looking down at the Ark was looking down on that Covenant. And when God looked at the Covenant, He saw the unfaithfulness of His people. Each year they were guilty of breaking the Law in so many ways. Two goats were required to symbolically deal with the sin of the people. The blood of the first goat was sprinkled on the cover of the Ark. That was the place of atonement. God’s wrath must be satisfied. The wages of sin is death. The blood of that goat symbolized a death that served as substitute for the people. God would make a way to satisfy His wrath against sin without consuming the sinner. As He looked down on the Law, He saw the blood on the Ark that covered, or atoned for the sin of Israel. That is the second idea communicated here by the seraph when he touched Isaiah’s lips with the coal. Isaiah’s sin was forgiven, atoned for.

The first idea the seraph communicated to Isaiah that his iniquity is taken away is represented by the second goat on the Day of Atonement. The high priest laid his hands on that goat, symbolically laying upon it the sin of the people. Then that goat was set loose in the wilderness to symbolize the idea of God removing the iniquity of his people from them. David communicated that idea in Psalm 103:12,

¹² As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Isaiah does not yet know the means by which God will accomplish this atonement. He simply knows that he deserved wrath and instead received forgiving grace.

Isaiah's vision of God reveals a lasting effect on his ministry in at least three ways. Isaiah maintains the holiness and supremacy of God throughout his preaching. That's number one. Number two, he also maintains a sense of the sinfulness of human beings that does not spring from the heart of a holy prophet judging the wickedness around him. Isaiah's recognition of human sin begins with self-awareness his own fallenness. He knows himself to be polluted. Number three, Isaiah has experienced the atonement of God. This is not anything that Isaiah did for himself. He deserved to be undone. Instead, God removed his sin. The hope of cleansing grace always adorns Isaiah's message, even when that message is certain doom for the nation as a whole. It is interesting to know that Isaiah's name literally means, "salvation of Yahweh." Isaiah knows from this experience that even when wrath is right and just, the possibility of salvation for the sinner exists.

Invitation of God

Having seen God, having seen himself, having experienced atoning grace, Isaiah is now in a position to hear and respond to the invitation of God.

⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying,

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Interestingly, God has not addressed Isaiah directly at all in this vision. There is a sense of majestic presence surrounding God. We sense that no one does anything in this place without God's direction. An angel would not have taken a coal to Isaiah's lips unless God commanded. Still, God has only worked through mediators to this point, just as we would expect from a King of kings. He ought to be unapproachable. Even the invitation we have just heard is directed toward the angelic host, not towards Isaiah.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

The "us" here, just as in Genesis 1:26, might naturally be assumed to include the angels surrounding the throne of God. He is the Lord of hosts. They participate in the execution of His purposes. Also, as in Genesis 1:26, we have to wonder if the "us" points to the reality of the triune nature of God; he is three in one. God does communicate his triune nature through Isaiah. We will see that in chapter 9. It is possible that this "us" hints in that direction. Though the image set up for us is a king addressing his court.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Though not addressed directly to Isaiah. Isaiah is now the central focus of this court. The atoning action of burning coal has drawn angelic attention to him. God does call some prophets more directly. They do not even seem to have a choice, if you think about Moses, or Jeremiah, later Paul.

Here God speaks out the invitation in such a way that we might not fault Isaiah if he were to look around for one of the seraphim to speak up and accept. Who is he, anyway, surrounded by such a powerful and holy company?

That is not what happens. Something clicks inside of Isaiah. His desire is to do the will of God. He responds immediately from some inner compulsion.

Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

This is Isaiah's second response. He responded to the vision of God's holiness with despair over his own sin. He now responds to God's forgiving grace and to God's invitation to service with all he has to offer, himself. "Here am I. Send me!"

The naivete of Isaiah's response reminds me how often this is the way. It reminds me of the first Lord of the Rings movie after Frodo has just agreed to take the ring to Mount Doom, facing certain death

or worse, Pippin runs in and insists on going too. And then, after committing himself he asks, “Right, where are we going?” And maybe Abraham is a better example. It took a lot of faith to leave his family in Haran and venture out to the promised land. Still, he had no idea how long it would take before he received a son. He did not understand that he would never personally own the land. He did not expect famine and fear. He certainly could not have foreseen God requiring that he sacrifice Isaac. I wonder if Abraham would have said, “Here am I. Send me!” if he knew all the pain that was going to be involved in following God. I am afraid I would not have had the courage to leave North Carolina as a missionary if I had any idea of the struggle and pain that would go with it. You can only say Isaiah’s response is arrogance, and I think that’s how some old people look at young people when they say they’re going to go and change the world. But I think that’s the wrong way to take it. Yes, there is a large dose of youthful idealism and naivete. Even with that, I know my response was real. Yeah, I don’t really get where we’re going or how it’s going to all work, but that response, when it’s a real response to the invitation, there’s nothing else you can say. “Here am I. Send me!” God needs somebody to go. I’m somebody.

Isaiah doesn’t have any idea where he is to be sent or what he is supposed to do. Just as the vision preceded the invitation - the call - the call has preceded the mission. God hasn’t told Isaiah what his mission is going to be yet. Isaiah simply agrees to do the will of God, whatever that will may be.

As it turns out, it is quite a good thing that Isaiah’s primary motivation is to do the will of God, and that that motivation springs out of his vision of the holiness of God, because the mission that God has for him is not going to be very motivating. It is going to be tragic, and difficult, and unappreciated. Here is the mission and Isaiah’s third response, verses 9-13.

Mission of God

⁹ He said, “Go, and tell this people:

‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive;	Keep on looking, but do not understand.’
¹⁰ “Render the hearts of this people insensitive,	Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,	Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,	And return and be healed.”

¹¹ Then I said, “Lord, how long?” And He answered,

“Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant, Houses are without people
And the land is utterly desolate,

¹² “The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst
of the land.

¹³ “Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be *subject* to burning,
Like a terebinth or an oak
Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

Isaiah is supposed to tell the people, “keep listening with your ears and keep looking with your eyes. But you will not be able to accurately process the data of your eyes and ears. You will not perceive or understand God, you will not perceive or understand yourself, you will not perceive or understand why things are happening the way they are happening.” That’s not a surprising message delivered to the people described in Isaiah 1-5. They drifted far from God spiritually and morally. They have come up with a new view of God, a new system of morality that justifies their own desires. They may look around them and see problems in their society, but they are not going to identify those problems as stemming from their sinful behavior. They are not going to say, “Society is messed up because we failed to relate to God with submission and humility.” They will see without perceiving.

In verse 10, God says Isaiah’s message will have an effect on the people of Judah. It is not the kind of effect you would expect God to want His prophet to create. You would expect God to send a prophet with a message that pierces hearts and moves people to understanding. That is what happened some

thirty years before this, when Jonah delivered his message to Judah's enemies the Assyrians. There was repentance.

God forewarns Isaiah not to expect national revival. Isaiah's message about the true state of Israel will have the opposite effect. It will render hearts insensitive. One of the mysteries of this passage is that we cannot quite tell whether God intends Himself to harden the people of Israel for destruction, like he did to Pharaoh and the leaders of Egypt, or whether the negative response to Isaiah's message is a natural response of a sinful people who love the darkness and hate the light.

The effect is described as completely comprehensive. That is emphasized by the chiasm arrangement of heart, ears, eyes, eyes, ears, heart. Isaiah's message will act as a catalyst that causes this spiritually unresponsive people to be even more resistant to the truth of God.

¹⁰ "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
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Is God's intention to prevent His people from repenting? It is not easy to tell just looking at this passage. As so often with a declaration or thesis at the beginning of a Biblical book, it is unwise to jump to an interpretation that satisfies our own theological perspective or system, rather than waiting to see how the author himself develops the idea in the rest of the book.

Context is king when it comes to interpretation. We really need Isaiah to develop this for us. The primary context for the mission God has just given him is the rest of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah will show his understanding of the mission in the way that he carries out the mission, you know, in the rest of the prophecy.

What will we see Isaiah doing? Though we are correct to recognize the sophistication of Isaiah's poetry, the moral message Isaiah delivers to Judah is quite direct. Come back to the Covenant! Stop being hypocritical in your worship. Care for the oppressed. Do what is right. Trust God. We will see in chapter 28 the criticism against Isaiah that he lacks sophistication. He will be told that his message to trust God is too simplistic for international politics. It's too easy! Just trust God! Just trust God! They will make fun of his prophecy, likening it to the babbling of a child just learning to speak. "That's how simple you are, Isaiah!"

There is haziness in the details of Isaiah's message when he begins to speak of the far distant future. And the further out he goes, the harder it is to understand all the details of the prophecy. But even then, the main points of the message are quite direct. Compare the first passage in chapter 1 with the last passage in chapter 66 which takes place at the end of time, and you will see in both places the same message of judgment on a rebellious people who refuse to submit to the knowledge of the Lord. They do not know their God.

Isaiah will not render people's hearts insensitive and dull by giving them a confusing, mystic, irrational message. That's not the mission. Isaiah will render the people's hearts insensitive by giving them simple truth.

Jesus described the state of the human heart in John 3:19, "The light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their deeds were evil." The darkness in a man responds negatively to moral light. Jesus went on to say in John 9:39, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

If you're confused and you're humble, and you just don't have an idea, you know you don't understand and you don't see, those are the kind of people who are ready to receive the message of Jesus. And in receiving, they saw, like the blind man in John 9. But if you think you know, you got it all figured out, you see, then in Jesus' coming you are blind. You think you see but you don't see a thing. Shining true light on the morally blind might produce repentance. The more natural human response is to hate the light and to try to eliminate it. Isaiah has been sent with a message of truth. That message will drive the majority further into decay, further into the darkness of their own corruption.

It also may be that verse 10 contains an ironic perspective. That would fit with what we will see in the rest of Isaiah and in what I've just described in the ministry of Jesus. The irony pivots on the word "otherwise."

¹⁰ "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim,
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In this passage the irony would be that, even though it sounds like we don't want them to return and be healed, render their hearts insensitive, otherwise they'll return and be healed, irony is that what is stated is not what is really desired. We would have to think of this passage in a way like this, "Render them insensitive and dull because we certainly would not want them to see and hear and understand and return and be healed. God forbid that they come back to Him and be healed!" The irony in the way the world often lashes out at the Christian message is that the Christian message, and hopefully the Christian delivering the message, truly desires the best possible result for people who are lashing out. We are offering them life. And yet, the message of Jesus is often portrayed as narrow, or bigoted, or stifling, or greedy, or simplistic. It smells like death to many who are dead, when in reality it is the true fragrance of life. God forbid that we would preach such a message; such a message that proclaims your eternal Word, that says every child, every woman, every man is created in the image of God; that says God wants to make you whole; that God wants a loving relationship with you, He wants to live with you forever! God forbid that we preach such an awful message! God forbid that people would actually listen, and return, and be healed, and live forever! That's a possible way to understand this passage. I am not sure it is the right interpretation. I think it is possible. I do know that even though God plans to fulfill His promise and bring the full weight of Covenant curse onto unfaithful Judah, He also has plans for a remnant that will indeed return and experience the same healing that Isaiah has experienced here.

Let's consider Isaiah's response to the mission. He does not question the validity of the mission. But he does have a question about the mission. His response is simple. "Then I said, 'Lord, how long?'"

And God answered,

Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant, Houses are without people
And the land is utterly desolate,

¹² The LORD has removed men far away, And the forsaken places are many in the midst
of the land.

¹³ Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, And it will again be *subject* to burning,
Like a terebinth or an oak

Whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

Judah is moving towards the curse of exile. Isaiah really has a dark message to communicate. But even in this there is a glimmer of hope for some. The nation is likened to an oak tree that will be cut down and burned. The burning is not a cleansing one. It is the burning of God's wrath. The hope is in the stump, which is called "a holy seed." If the tree is the nation, the holy seed is a remnant that will regrow one day. The reference to a holy seed seems to have another function as well.

This chapter began by dating Isaiah's vision to the death of Uzziah. Isaiah is the only Old Testament writer to ever mark a year by the death of a king. The expected reference would be to note the year of this king's reign, saying "in the 52nd year of Uzziah." But Isaiah points out it is the year of Uzziah's death. Why? I think we are supposed to remember something about Uzziah. You know anything else about Uzziah? And there is one thing everybody in Isaiah's day would have thought of when Isaiah mentioned his death. They would have thought, "Oh yes, the day the leper king died." Through much of his reign Uzziah was known as a good king. And as a good king, he was blessed with wisdom, and wealth, and power. I mentioned at the beginning how his fame stretched to Egypt. Well, at the height of his fame, Uzziah became proud, and he entered the Temple of God, and took upon himself the role of a priest and offered incense on the altar. 2 Chronicles 26 tells us that 80 priests joined

together to rebuke him. Uzziah became infuriated with them. But before he could act, he was struck with leprosy. Uzziah finished out his days living in a separate house, while his son Jotham reigned on his behalf. That's what the people of Jerusalem would have thought of when they read, "In the year of Uzziah's death."

Now, the leprosy of Uzziah makes me think back to Isaiah's image in chapter 1 of the man beaten from the sole of his foot to his head and covered with welts and raw wounds, unbandaged. Spiritual depravity is easily compared to leprosy. The nerves of the leper cease to function, so the diseased person is not aware of being cut or burned. They do not feel it. They don't know they're damaging themselves. Likewise, a spiritually diseased person is not fully aware of the damage they do to spirit and soul through their behavior. They do not feel it. Uzziah can be taken as a symbol of the current state of Judah, proud, yet leprous; unable to perceive their self-inflicted damage.

Understanding the reference to Uzziah's death, we see an *inclusio* Isaiah has created between the first idea in this chapter and the last. We start with the death of Uzziah. We end with the tree being struck down. The king represents the nation. The holy seed is a future son of David. He is the branch we will encounter in chapter 11.

And we do not have to choose whether or not the holy seed is the nation, or the holy seed is Messiah. The promise of a seed to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is understood in both the corporate and individual sense. "In your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Seed is both the people of Israel and also the one special son of Israel who will provide salvation blessing for the nations.

So, this last line of chapter 6 hints at the theme of all of Isaiah 1-39, which we are calling, The Book of the King. Who is this holy seed? What kind of king will be able to carry righteous government on His shoulders? Who will this Son of David be?

Conclusion

Let's conclude by making Isaiah chapter 6 personal. I have two questions for you that this passage has raised for me to personally think about. I do not intend for this to be judgmental. It is more of an opportunity to make sure your heart is calibrated. We all need to evaluate and make adjustments as we go. Here is the first question. God says, "Whom shall I send?" What is your response?

Do you need to know where He will send you? Do you need to know what He will ask of you? Does that really matter? God says, "Whom shall I send?" It is not a rhetorical question. It is an invitation. What is your heart response to God? Do you respond, "Here I am Lord, send me?" If you do, tell God. Respond with prayer from your heart. Say it in your own words, "Here I am Lord, send me!"

"Whatever role you have for me, whether it is to change what I am doing now or to keep doing it for your glory, whether it is to go from this place I'm living now or to stay here for your glory, whatever role you have for me, Lord, here I am, send me."

That was the first recalibration question. Here is the second.

If you have responded, "Here I am Lord, send me," and you have a sense of the mission you are called to do, is your focus more on the mission, or is your focus more on your vision of who God is? Which takes precedent? What drives you? What sustains you? What do you communicate to others? When you stand up to speak, do you communicate the mission, or do you communicate your vision of God, the awe, and wonder, and gratitude you have towards God as He has revealed Himself to be?

Isaiah offers in this description of his own experience a reality check for our own hearts. The mission is important. But the call of God comes before the mission. First, have you responded to that call? "Here I am Lord, send me! Whatever, I am yours!"

And the call of God is important, but the vision of God comes before the call. If we forget to cultivate the vision in our souls of who we see God to be and we forget to communicate our awe and wonder of who God is to others, then our own service for God will eventually dry out. Maintaining our first love for Christ, our vision of how wonderful He is, that really is the one thing of first importance. Everything else follows.