

The Call of Isaiah (The God of Glory, Grace and Going)

Isaiah 6:1-13

Key Verse: 6:8, “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me.’”

This passage is the call of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah volunteers himself for the Lord’s mission. People do not naturally volunteer for the Lord’s mission. Rather, as we saw from the call of Moses, our tendency is to avoid, run from and make excuses not to accept God’s call. Then how could Isaiah volunteer to do what God wanted? It all started with a vision of God’s glory, and a painful touch of God’s grace. This message has 3 parts: God’s glory, God’s grace and God’s going. Let’s consider these movements in this beautiful Bible passage: glory, grace and going. May God help each of us to get a glimpse of God’s glory and to experience his touch of grace, so that we too may participate in going where God wants us to go.

First, Isaiah sees the God of glory.

The passage opens with the words, “In the year that King Uzziah died...” The year was 740 B.C., that is, 740 years before Christ. King Uzziah ruled the southern kingdom of Judah. The Bible says, “as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper” (2Ch 26:5)...”But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense” (2Ch 26:16), which was lawful only for priests. When he didn’t listen to a rebuke about this, leprosy broke out on his forehead, and he was a leper to the day of his death (2Ch 26:18-21). So the timing of this event, the year that King Uzziah died, was a year of leadership transition in Judah. Isaiah prophesied from this time and through the reigns of three more kings of Judah—Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1).

What happens next in this passage is a rare and astonishing vision of God’s glory that God gave to Isaiah. It reads as follows (1-4):

“I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and 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 thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.”

This is a rare passage in the Bible called a “theophany,” which is “a visible manifestation to humankind of God.” God is actually seen or described in some way. It was not a dream. Isaiah was awake, so we call it a “vision.” It seems that this vision was in the temple, or at least that is what Isaiah saw. He saw the Lord God Almighty, seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and his robe filled the whole temple. A king’s robe denotes his authority and supremacy. God’s kingdom is infinite. He reigns over all.

Above the Lord stood seraphim. The word “seraphim” means “burning ones.” These were angelic creatures with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with the wings they covered their feet, and with two wings they were flying. Even these angelic fiery beings seemed to be embarrassed to be in the presence of God on his throne. They didn’t dare to look at the holy God.

These seraphim were flying around the throne of God and calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts [or, the LORD Almighty]; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The LORD is holy, holy, holy. He is pure and sinless and set apart from anything in creation. Apostle Paul wrote of this God: “who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” (1Ti 6:15-16). Revelation 4:8 describes a similar vision: “And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’”

God is holy, almighty and full of glory. Isaiah got a glimpse of God’s glory. Have you ever gotten a glimpse of God’s glory, goodness or greatness? Once Moses asked of God, “Please show me your glory.” And God said to him, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (Ex 33:18-23). No one has ever seen God in his full glory. We only get glimpses of his glory. We get glimpses of God’s glory when we humbly and earnestly hear God’s word, repent of our sins, and pray.

Have you ever prayed like Moses: “Lord, please show me your glory”? There are some glorious things you can see on earth, like Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon or a snow-

capped mountain range, or a star-lit sky. Even looking at Lake Michigan, or down from an airplane, or looking at a growing baby can be a wondrous sight. We are in awe even to see such earthly displays of glory. Psalm 19:1 and 4 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork... Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world."

The apostles saw this glory in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of glory. Apostle John wrote, "we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

Second, Isaiah experiences God's forgiving grace.

At this awesome sight, the temple was filled with smoke. How did Isaiah respond? Notice that he did not say, "Wow! Cool!" Rather, his eyes were opened to his own wretchedness and unworthiness before God. Listen to his cry: "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!"

"Woe is me! For I am lost!" Some translations say, "I am ruined," or, "I am undone!" Isaiah was wrecked to the core when he had this vision of God on his throne. He felt like he was going to die or be thrown away like a dirty rag. In particular he felt his lips were unclean. Why? He must've said many things that did not please and glorify God. He spoke words of bitterness, anger and unbelief. He felt his lips were unclean. Not only so, he felt everyone's lips were unclean. People were only speaking dirty, ungodly words that denied God on his throne.

Have you ever felt rotten and dirty? I believe you have. That is the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicts the world in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment. We can try to hide or try to run, but we cannot escape God's all-seeing eye. We cannot deceive God's all-knowing mind. God knows and sees all. God knows our most wretched, sinsick thoughts and desires and actions. God knows when we mess up every time in evil, wicked and wrong things we think and say and do. We know we deserve punishment because of our guilty conscience.

In the moment that Isaiah wanted to run and hide and escape from that scene, God did something painful yet marvelous for him. Look at verses 6-7. "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.'" Painful but amazing grace! God took away his guilt and atoned for his sin. How? With a burning coal from the altar of sacrifice. From the altar of sacrifice our sins can be forgiven. On the altar is the Lamb of God, Jesus

Christ, who takes away the sin of the world. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us, taking away our guilt and atoning for our sin.

Have you experienced this painful but amazing grace? Why is it painful? Because we don't like to confess our sins. It's painful. Sometimes we would rather hide or wallow in our sins. But when we confess them, God takes them away. 1 John 1:9-10 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." So the forgiveness and freedom comes not from hiding our sins from God, or trying to hide them, but confessing them, admitting that God's way is right.

Do you know his grace in Jesus Christ? Have you received the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ?

Third, Isaiah shares in the mission of going.

In his vision, Isaiah saw the holy, almighty, Lord of glory and he heard angels. Now he hears God himself: "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'" God was speaking to his divine council. God wanted to send someone. But we don't know where yet. God wanted someone to go for him, though he didn't give the destination or the purpose.

This was Isaiah's chance. Isaiah didn't know where, but he wanted to go for God. He wanted to do God's bidding, whatever it was. So he spoke up saying, "Here I am! Send me." How could he volunteer for God's mission? It was because he saw the Lord of glory and received his touch of grace. He wanted to participate in whatever this glorious Lord had in mind. Actually, without seeing a glimpse of God's glory and experiencing his touch of grace, we really can't do anything lasting for God. We cannot do God's work with our own strength or wisdom or determination. Our own resources all fall short eventually.

Jesus said in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." We really can't do anything of lasting value to God apart from Jesus Christ. The great Frenchman Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) understood this. He was an accomplished mathematician, scientist and philosopher. But he wrote, "Without Christ man can only be sinful and wretched. With Christ man is freed from sin and wretchedness. For in him is all our virtue and happiness. Apart from him there can only be vice, wretchedness, error, darkness, death, and despair...Not only do we know God only through Jesus Christ, but we know ourselves only through Jesus Christ. We know life and death only

through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or of our death, of God or of ourselves.”¹

So what was the mission that Isaiah was volunteering for? It was not an easy mission. See God’s reply in verses 9-10: “Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ 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.” God knew that the people of Isaiah’s time were spiritually deaf and blind. Jesus quoted these same words of Isaiah to describe the spiritually blind and deaf people of his time. These words apply to spiritually blind and deaf people in every generation. They do not want to hear God’s word or see his glory. Still, God’s heart is that all people might turn and be healed. God doesn’t want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

After hearing about the difficult mission he was going on, Isaiah wondered, “How long, O Lord?” How long must he deliver this message to deaf ears?

The Lord’s answer was not so encouraging. See verses 11-13. “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.”

God is foretelling here the exile of his people Israel to Babylon, which happened about 150 years after this prophecy. Isaiah would not be alive to see the exile. But other prophets would, who would carry the message.

Isaiah had a difficult mission to preach God’s message when people weren’t interested in listening. Are you ever discouraged when the Lord’s work doesn’t seem to flourish as you hope? Take note of Isaiah’s faithful, willing obedience. But that’s not all. There is always hope.

The passage ends: “The holy seed is its stump.” Even trees that are cut down leave a stump, and from the stump shoots sprout and a new tree grows. The holy seed is the stump. God’s hope is in the holy seed. The holy seed is the faithful remnant among God’s people, those who trust in God and believe his promises. The holy seed also looks forward to the Holy and Faithful One, Jesus Christ, who fulfills God’s mission.

¹ <https://cjts3rs.wordpress.com/2018/04/17/apart-from-jesus-christ-we-cannot-know-the-meaning-of-our-life-or-of-our-death-of-god-or-of-ourselves-b-pascal/>

God still wants all people to turn and be healed. God wants all people to turn from their sins in repentance, put their trust in Jesus' atoning sacrifice, and be saved. God wants everyone to live new lives in Jesus for God's glory.

However, our human thinking is to assume that most people are not that bad, but are basically ok. Our fallen behavior is to leave people alone and not really care about their happiness and eternal salvation. Do you care about what God thinks and wants? Listen to God's question: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

In today's passage, Isaiah got a glimpse of God's glory and experienced his painful, forgiving grace. With his glimpse of glory and experience of grace, Isaiah volunteered to participate in God's going. May God bless each of us to see his glory, experience his grace, and participate in his going.