

Isaiah: His Call and Commission

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him who cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. (Isaiah 6:1-9)

It is characteristic of human nature to think that the best is in the past, frozen in the mold of history, or that out yonder in the uncertain future there is going to be a better day. The *best* never seems to be where we are at the present. We think of it as being either in the past or in the future. When we are young, we look to the future, and when we get to be senior citizens we speak of “the good old days.” It is difficult for us to believe that right now we might be at the best time of our lives.

Isaiah was not unlike the ilk of mankind in this respect. In the sixth chapter of his prophecy, which is a record of his call and commission as a prophet, we find this man has the same sort of notion. He opens this section by sounding a note of utter desolation: “In the year that King Uzziah died ...” (verse 1).

Uzziah had been a good king. He intruded one time into the priest’s office, which he should not have done, and his punishment was leprosy for the rest of his life. However, he was a good king during the period when the land of Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel.

In college I took a course called Freshman Bible, and there was a question that had been asked from time immemorial, a question that was sure to be on the examination: “Name the kings of Israel and Judah and briefly describe the reign of each.” Well, some ingenious freshman in years gone by had discovered that if you just memorize the names of the kings and write after each one of them, “a bad king,” you couldn’t make less than a B – and what freshman wants to make more than a B? So we all just memorized the names of the kings and wrote after each, “a bad king.” But when we wrote after Uzziah, “a bad king,” we were wrong. I was amazed in studying the life of this man to find what a wonderful king he had been.

Now sometime during the fifty-two years of Uzziah’s reign, Isaiah was born. As a young man he was called to prophetic office, and it happened at the time of Uzziah’s death.

The Throne of God

Isaiah opens this sixth chapter on a very doleful note. He takes us to a funeral—“In the year that king Uzziah died ...” You can catch a note of pessimism that is going through his mind and heart: *Good old king Uzziah. Now that he is dead what will happen to our nation? Probably the next king will plunge us into idolatry again. Our nation will no longer be prosperous. There will*

be famine, and the enemy will come in from the outside as before—we will become subject to an outside power.

Isaiah is a pessimist at the beginning, as you can well understand. Someone has defined a pessimist as one who blows out the light that the optimist thought he saw in the dark.

With these things in mind, Isaiah enters the temple. This is a good place to go, by the way, because the psalmist had said, "... in his temple doth everyone speak of his glory" (Psalm 29:9). He goes into the place where he makes a two-fold discovery. It is a discovery, I am convinced, that God's people today need to make. Many of us are in the position that this man was in when he entered the temple.

The first discovery that Isaiah made was that the real King of Israel and Judah was not dead. Actually, He was not even sick. The real King of Israel and Judah was still on the throne.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. (Isaiah 6:1)

Isaiah realized that behind that earthly throne was the heavenly throne, and God was still sovereign and overruling in the affairs of this world.

A great many people today feel rather hopeless. I remember that some years ago James Reston, writing for the *New York Times*, made the statement that though in Washington they are still talking optimistically, back in the cloakrooms many are saying that the problems are escalating so that there is no solution to the problems of this world. Since that time, with the spreading of Communism, Islamic Fundamentalism, Liberation Theology, the growing threat of global war, the deadly AIDS virus, etc., the picture is not only darker, it is frightening!

Isaiah seemed to have this hopeless feeling about the future. Uzziah had been a good king, but now he was gone and no one could take his place. However God is reminding Isaiah that *He* is still on the throne.

Emerson was wrong. He said that *things* were in the saddle and they ride mankind. Things are not in the saddle – they never have been. God is on the throne. He is still ruling in the affairs of men today.

A great many people feel there may be a man who can solve the problems of this world. During an election year, we get the impression that some men have all the answers. But let me say that no man has the solutions to the problems in this, world. My friend, don't be deceived by the fantasy that man himself can replace God and by taking thought create a new age, a better and beautiful world; or that he by consorting with the occult can bring about a perfect society. Behind the thrones of this world is the throne of God. And God is still upon that throne. He is still overruling in the affairs down here. This little universe has not slipped from under His control.

This is the first truth that Isaiah discovered when he went into the temple: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne"

He Is High and Holy

Now the second thing Isaiah saw was that the One sitting upon the throne was "high and lifted up," that He was a holy God. This is something else that we need to learn. There is no excuse for our being pessimists today. Every child of God should be an optimist. We need to recognize that our God is a holy God, and He is the Judge. Not only does Isaiah's prophecy

include the fifty-third chapter where God is the Savior on a cross, but it includes this sixth chapter where God is the Judge on the throne, high and holy, whose sovereign will finally shall prevail down here.

There is a great question today about what is right and what is wrong. Isaiah says, “Woe unto them who call evil, good, and good, evil . . .” (Isaiah 5:20). At the present hour we are led to believe that the criminal is always right, that the man who is wrong is the man who is right. Our entire system is upside down as far as morality is concerned. Not only has God put down certain laws that reveal He is a holy God, the interesting thing is that when His laws are broken, He doesn’t have to reach in and execute judgment. The sin works itself out. Sin carries its own penalty. The wages of sin *is* death. It just works out that way. We are seeing our contemporary culture demonstrate this. God’s laws are being ignored, and we have more problems than the world has ever had before. Our nation has problems which it cannot solve – alarming alcoholism, a spiraling rate of drug addiction and sexually transmitted diseases of epidemic proportions. You and I are living in that kind of society. But God is still on the throne, and He is a holy God.

Now Isaiah tells us that above God’s throne “stood the seraphim” (Isaiah 6:2). I want to make a confession to you: I do not know what seraphim are. Of course, I have never seen one, but I have read all I can find on the subject. What I have read reveals to me that the writers do not know either. The difference between us is that it took some of them an entire chapter to say they didn’t know and I can say it in one sentence: *I do not know what seraphim are*. We know only that the seraphim appear to be high created intelligences, above the average angel. The Word of God makes it clear that there are several orders of angels or spiritual creatures, and it speaks not only of seraphim but also of cherubim who protect the holiness of God. There in the temple were likenesses of two cherubim of gold with wings stretched forth over the mercy seat, which is symbolic of their service. Although it appears that the seraphim have this same service, they seem also to reach out in judgment, dealing with sin. The word *seraphim* means “burning,” indicating perhaps that they are on fire to protect the holiness of God.

Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isaiah 6:2, 3)

This is a tremendous picture of the holiness of God. These creatures in the presence of God repeat over and over, “Holy, holy, holy is God.” The purpose is to somehow or other communicate to mankind down here that you and I deal with a holy God.

We are living in a day when men think they can rush into the presence of God and that they can treat the Lord Jesus as if He is just a buddy. May I say to you that He is high and holy and lifted up. If He should appear in your church next Sunday morning, nobody would rush up to Him, nobody would become familiar with Him. Everybody would go down on their faces before Him. That is the picture the Word of God gives.

No one was as close to Him on earth as was His disciple John. John would come to Him and make suggestions. You will notice that the Lord Jesus never asked for advice, nor did He follow man’s advice, but John was there to give it. Then in the Upper Room John even reclined on His bosom. He was familiar with Him. But, my friend, when he saw the glorified Christ on the Isle of Patmos, he fell at His feet as dead (Revelation 1:17). He did not rush into His presence.

You and I deal with a holy God. And God made it very clear that He can save us on only

one basis. You see, though He loves us, He doesn't *save* us by love. God saves us by grace. Certainly He loves us. It would break your heart and mine if we knew how much He loves us, but He cannot save us by love. He saves us by grace, by paying the penalty for our sins Himself.

You see, the forgiveness of God is not sentimental. It is not that He is bighearted. His forgiveness is different from human forgiveness. For instance, you step on my toe and ruin my shine, and you say, "Forgive me." I'll forgive you – although you ought to give me the price of another shine! But I'll forgive you for stepping on my toe. Human forgiveness may rest on no payment at all. But God never forgives until the penalty is paid – never. The reason He can forgive your sin and my sin is because His Son, nearly 2,000 years ago, paid for it on the cross. He redeemed us.

Always in Scripture when forgiveness is mentioned, the blood of Christ is mentioned. We have forgiveness of sin. How? Through the blood of Christ. The *penalty* has been paid. My friend, that is God's method. In substance, God is saying to a lost world today, "I love you. I want to save you. I gave My Son to die for you. You accept Him or reject Him. If you reject Him, you'll not be saved. If you accept Him, you will be saved. This is *My* salvation. Take it or leave it." He is doing it without any sentimentality. He is doing it on a righteous basis because He is a holy God.

Our God is moving in this world, even at this very hour, against sin. He is moving forward undeviatingly, unhesitatingly, uncompromisingly, against sin; and He will not stop until He drives it from His universe. He will not even accept the white flag of truce. He will not make peace with it. He intends to remove it from His universe. He makes that very clear.

Now I'm grateful to Him for that because it is sin that has brought wreckage to the human family. It is sin that puts grey in the hair, puts a totter in the step, puts a stoop in the shoulder. It is sin that is breaking hearts. It is sin that brings horror and suffering into this world. It is sin that is filling the cemeteries. I thank God He will not compromise with it! It will not be in His universe for eternity. He has made a plan whereby He can redeem those who will come His way and accept His salvation. He is a *holy* God. This is something we need to get back into our thinking today. God is on the throne, and He is a holy God.

Isaiah, a Man of Unclean Lips

Notice the effect the vision had on this man Isaiah. We begin to look around for him and we can't find him. The reason is he has gone down on his face before God. Listen to him:

Then said I, Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. (Isaiah 6:5)

Before this experience, I have a notion that this man Isaiah was very comfortable. I suppose that he attended the worship at the temple. I suppose that he considered himself a good Israelite under the Mosaic system – that he met all the requirements of the ritual, that he brought all the proper sacrifices. I am of the opinion that you could say he was a saved man. But now he goes into the temple, he sees God upon the throne and realizes that He is a *holy* God. Isaiah sees something else: He sees himself as he really is.

Today the problem with so many church members is that they are following afar off. They have not gotten close in to the Lord Jesus, and they do not see themselves as they really are. John

puts it very bluntly:

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.
(1 John 1:10)

That's not very polite – I wouldn't say it. John did. However, John also says:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth us from all sin.
(1 John 1:7)

What is that light? It is the Word of God. My friend, we are too far from the Word of God.

A great many folk feel if they can go through some little ritual, follow some little system, attend some little courses that promise answers to all the problems of life, that is all they need. A man came to Dwight L. Moody when he began his first Philadelphia Crusade and said, "Mr. Moody, I hope to get enough religion during this campaign to last me the rest of my life."

Mr. Moody said to him, "Did you eat enough breakfast this morning to last you the rest of your life?"

"Of course I didn't."

"Well, neither will you get enough 'religion' in this meeting to last you the rest of your life."

We don't get it in one or two doses. Rather, by walking in the light of the Word of God, we begin to see ourselves as we really are. When we see ourselves as we really are, then we see also that God has a remedy for us. He not only has the remedy for lost sinners, He has a remedy for His own who are out of fellowship, who are not in a place of service, who have no witness, and whose lives do not count for God. We need to get into our Lord's presence, and the only way we can do this is by spending time in the Word of God.

Let me illustrate this with a very homely illustration. During my first pastorate in Tennessee, I spent my vacations holding meetings up in the hill country of middle Tennessee. I was in a place called Woodbury, and after the morning service a doctor there invited me to go squirrel hunting. Now there is nothing I'd rather do than go squirrel hunting. It was the fall of the year. It was a gloomy, dark day, looked like it might rain at any moment – but that never kept a hunter out of the woods. So he picked me up after lunch, and we went out to his farm. We parked out in the barnyard, got our guns, and started down the creek.

Hunting was good and we got several squirrels. After about a mile we came to a fork of the creek. He said, "Now you take the left fork, come around the mountain back of the barn, and I'll take the right fork and come around back to the barn."

So I started out. It was still good hunting, but a mist began to fall. Then it began to sprinkle, but I kept thinking it would let up. Then all of a sudden I discovered that the squirrels had all crawled into their hollows. The best they could tell, there was only one *nut* outside, so they went in. And I decided I'd better start looking for a shelter. By that time I had made the turn around the hill. There was a big cornfield there and along the side there were caves. I began looking for a cave that I could get into out of the rain. I found a pretty good sized one and crawled into it.

I sat there in the dark for about forty-five minutes. It didn't quit raining, and I was getting cold, so I scraped the leaves together and put a match to them. Then I began to look around by the light of the fire. I have never seen a place where there were as many spiders and lizards! They were above me, they were all around me, then over in the corner coiled up was a little

snake. I could have reached out and put my hand on it. Since I have always felt that possession was nine-tenths of the law, I got out and turned it over to them. They were there first.

Now notice that I had sat there for forty-five minutes, as comfortable as anyone could be, until I got the fire going. The light of the fire didn't *make* the little snake, the lizards, and spiders, it just revealed them.

Today there are multitudes of people sitting comfortably in a church pew, thinking everything is all right. But if they would get into the light, they might say as Isaiah did, "Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

You wonder what Isaiah had been saying to have unclean lips. You wonder what his sin was. We only know it was the sin of a believer. You can speculate all you want to, but I don't think he was much different from those around him. He just saw his true self in the presence of God.

It was the same thing that Paul experienced. Paul was a believer when he said, "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24).

How many Christians today have a desire, an ambition, to live for God?

I have been receiving letters from many young fellows who have drifted away – but they are coming back. One young man wrote, and I could almost feel his anguish, "Dr. McGee, I want to live for *God!* I want it better than I've had it. I want something worthwhile." When we see ourselves in the light of the presence of God, what a difference it will make!

This man Isaiah was brought into the presence of God. Both in the Old and New Testaments we see that men who came into the Lord's presence were transformed. As we have already seen, John fell at His feet; Ezekiel, when he saw "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD," fell upon his face (Ezekiel 1:28); Daniel said, when he saw the glory of the Lord, "There remained no strength in me" (Daniel 10:8) – and when there is no strength in you, you aren't perpendicular with the ground, you are horizontal with it. He had gone down on his face before God.

Job is another one. In my study of the Book of Job, I take the position that the primary message is not that of suffering, but the primary message of Job is *repentance*. You see, God has used books in the Old Testament to illustrate every great doctrine that we have. For example, *redemption* is illustrated in the Book of Exodus, and the *love* side of redemption in the little Book of Ruth, and the *providence* of God in the Book of Esther. The Book of Job illustrates repentance. God did not select the worst person in the world, or some drug addict, to show repentance. When God wanted to teach us repentance, He chose probably the best man who ever lived and showed that *he* needed to repent. Job is that man.

A letter from a man back East rebuked me for saying that Job needed to repent. He argued, "Job was such an upright man, why would he need to repent?" Well, it wasn't *I* who said he needed to repent, the Book of Job says that. It also says that Job *was* upright. Job could stand against his three so-called friends and refute their accusations. Although they insisted there was some secret sin in his life, they could not pin anything on him. Job said his life was an open book. Even his enemies could not charge him with wrongdoing. Rather, they were forced to praise him.

But one day Job, like Isaiah, came into the presence of God. This is what he said:

***I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee.
Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*** (Job 42:5, 6)

This is the best cure for “I-itis” that I know anything about, and some folk today have that terrible disease. In the first part of the Book of Job there is a whole lot of “I” going on. At the last he gets into the presence of God, and what a difference!

Let us consider just one more individual, because this is an important lesson for all of us. Let’s take Joshua for an example. Now Joshua succeeded Moses, which means he followed a great man. Moses was a great man of God. Even today many consider him as the greatest Jew who ever lived because of the tremendous impact he made. And Joshua succeeded *him*. If I had been Moses’ successor, I am sure I would have sent a blurb down to the local newspaper with my picture – my best picture – and I would have told them, “I am succeeding Moses.” Well, I think Joshua did something like that.

Joshua found himself now the leader of a great nation. God had led Israel across the Jordan River by miracle to encourage Joshua, to let him know that He was with him as He had been with Moses. But this man had some lessons to learn.

One morning Joshua walks out of his tent and he looks out over the tents of the twelve tribes. At least a million and a half people are there. Tremendous! He is the leader, he is the general, and as he looks over that sea of tents, probably a couple of buttons pop off his vest.

It was a marvelous encampment that caused even Balaam to say,

How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! Like the valleys are they spread forth, like gardens by the river’s side, like the trees of aloes which the LORD hath planted, and like cedar trees beside the waters.

(Numbers 24:5, 6)

He couldn’t even curse them as he attempted to do, but had to bless them instead. It was a wonderful sight.

To this man Joshua as he stands there in the morning it is a wonderful sight. He is in *command*. What a glorious position he had! Then he looks out at the edge of the camp and sees a man with a drawn sword. Now General Joshua had given no orders to anyone to draw a sword. Apparently somebody around there doesn’t know he is in charge. So he begins to stride out through the camp to where this man is, and I think he walks like a second lieutenant. He comes to this man and demands, “Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?” (Joshua 5:13). Or, in good old Americana, “What’s the big idea? Are you on our side? If you are, don’t you know who is in charge here? Don’t you know who the general is?”

Then that One turned, and when He did, Joshua found himself looking into the face of the One who said, “Nay, but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come” (Joshua 5:14). That One who was the captain there is the One who, according to the Book of Hebrews, is the Captain of our salvation, the pre-incarnate Christ. And Joshua went down on his face before Him.

Oh, Joshua learned a great lesson at that time. He found out that GHQ was not in his tent, it was up yonder. He found out that he was not *giving* orders, he was *taking* orders. He found that the *Lord* was still in charge. He learned to say “Yes, Sir” and “No, Sir” to the Commander.

From this point on I don’t have any problem with Joshua. Up until I saw this, I did question his tactics. A liberal friend of mine once said that he had trouble with the walls of Jericho falling down as recorded in Joshua 6. I said, “Well, just go over there and look at the ruins – they have been excavated. The walls fell down. Maybe you can come up with a better explanation of how it happened.” Those who want to dismiss its being a miracle say that there was an earthquake. All right, I’ll buy that. It was sure good timing, though, and only God could have timed it that

accurately.

Personally, I had no problem with the walls, but I did have a problem with a general who would march an army around a city seven days, then on the seventh day march the army around it seven times. My question is: What is the strategy of a silly thing like that? I can't think of an army doing anything more foolish. But I suppose the Pentagon on the inside of the city of Jericho would be almost crazy after those seven days, wondering what was going to happen.

If you or I had been there, I am sure we would have gone up to Joshua and said, "Say, what is the idea of marching around and not striking a blow?"

He would say, "I don't know."

"You mean to tell me you are the *general*, and you don't know?"

"You are wrong. I am not the general. I take orders from up yonder. And the orders are for me to march my men around it. I just obey orders."

This answers my question about General Joshua. I understand him now.

Oh, my friend, how we need today to see the living Christ. And when we do see Him, we are bound to go down on our faces before Him.

The Cleansing Coal

Now, going back to Isaiah's experience, a burning coal is taken from the altar and is touched to his lips.

Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. (Isaiah 6:6, 7)

He is cleansed. Cleansing for us today comes as we confess our sins:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

The lips have to confess. That live coal was the judging of Isaiah's sin, by the way.

The Heart Response

I do not know whether Isaiah had been called by God before. I think he had, but he had not heard it; that is, he had not heeded it. But now that he is cleansed he can hear and he can heed this voice that asked, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And we are told his response:

... Here am I; send me [Isaiah 6:8]

This constitutes Isaiah's call.

Now the next verse gives Isaiah's commission:

And he [the Lord] said, Go, and tell this people (Isaiah 6:9)

This is to be his ministry. Relaying God's message to his people is to be Isaiah's life. This is the thing that God has called him to do.

Today we hear a great deal about finding the will of God for our own lives. All sorts of little mechanical things are set up for us to do. It reminds me of setting up dominoes so that one touch will cause them to fall right in line. I don't believe determining God's will is quite like that.

God, I am confident, will lead you differently from the way He leads me. He will use me differently from the way He will use you. The important thing for you and for me is to put ourselves in the presence of Christ. When in His presence we will see that we are not capable, that we do not have the ability to do God's will. And we will see that He does not want us to do it in and of ourselves. We will see that what He is doing today is saving sinners and putting them into something new: The body of believers. He places us where He wants us as a member of that body to function for Him.

The most exciting thing for a young believer is to find out what God wants him to do. There is nothing as thrilling as that. And it is when you and I get into His presence, see ourselves as we really are, come in confession to Him, that we are in the position to hear His call and His commission.