

Isaiah - Talk 5

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[0 : 00] In the year that King Uzziah died, 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 took at the voice of him who called, 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 is atoned for.

[1 : 15] 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.

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 tent remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth, or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.

[2 : 29] The holy seed is its stump. Now in the world of Hollywood, a crisis demands a hero, someone to save the day.

In the new James Bond film, No Time to Die, Bond is recruited by the CIA to find a kidnapped MI6 scientist. I won't spoil the film for you, largely because I haven't seen it.

But we all know Bond is a great example of the kind of hero we think is needed when a major geopolitical crisis develops. Someone supremely confident in themselves, charismatic, talented, and above all, successful.

Well, chapters 1-5 of the book of Isaiah, which formed the introduction to the book, introduced the major geopolitical crisis facing God's people in the 8th century BC, as they warned of the judgment that the people of Judah and Jerusalem were facing, via the twin threats of Assyria in the present and Babylon in the future, which together cast their shadow over the whole book.

And in chapter 5, the chapter before ours today, we learn that Judah was herself responsible for the fate which confronted her, because of her rebellion against the God who'd done so much for her.

[3 : 48] In the second half of the chapter, God even pronounces a series of devastating woes against his people, declaring his anger against them. Things have hit rock bottom.

And so as we get to chapter 6, and the beginning of the first of the two main sections of the book, the stage is set for a hero who will sort out the problem, who will successfully rescue God's people from their enemies, and restore them to right relationship with him.

But what we actually get in chapter 6 is not what we might expect. Because while the chapter does include the commissioning of a man to deal with the issue in question, and does tell us of the mission he's given, it's a far cry from the kind of hero and mission we find in Hollywood.

Because the man God chooses, the prophet Isaiah, rather than being the swashbuckling, confident hero who will single-handedly rescue Israel through his own brilliance, turns out to be a terrified, reticent man, unfit for the job in hand, even by his own admission.

And the mission he's given, far from involving glorious conquest over foreign powers, or even a successful turning of God's people from sin to serve him afresh in a moment of national revival, would instead include a message of judgment against the people of Judah, and be a ministry that would be widely rejected, ignored, and despised.

[5 : 20] Seemingly a ministry of failure, in other words. It's not James Bond, is it? And yet chapter 6, along with the more positive second commission that Isaiah has given in chapter 40, at the start of the second main section of the book, is God's response to chapters 1 to 5, and to the sin of his people.

God's response to the apostasy of Israel and Judah, is to commission Isaiah for a very surprising ministry. And we're going to look together at this response, and Isaiah's commissioning this morning, under two main headings.

So first of all, a terrifying vision. A terrifying vision. You see, what kind of hero is God going to raise up to rescue his people?

Who is the go-to MI6 special agent the heavenly court turns to in a moment of existential crisis? Well, the answer is, this man, Isaiah.

But the problem is, Isaiah is no different from the people to whom he's to be sent. He's part of the problem. And so Isaiah 6 begins by showing us that Isaiah himself needs saving.

[6 : 32] Just as the beginning of the book of Exodus, if we're familiar with that, records the salvation of Moses, presenting it as a pattern of the salvation of the whole people through Moses, which it then goes on to describe.

So God's dealings with Isaiah in chapter 6 are, in a sense, a picture of what God will need to do for all Israel, if the problem of their rebellion is to be resolved.

So while we need to be careful not to apply everything in this chapter directly to us, because there are a number of ways in which Isaiah was unique in being given a commission, which we haven't been given, he is, in another sense, representative of all of God's people, showing what must happen for atonement to be possible.

Isaiah had to be saved before he could be sent. And while his sending may have been unique, his salvation was not. And so I want us to observe a number of aspects of Isaiah's salvation that we notice from the terrifying vision he receives under this first heading.

So first notice that Isaiah saw the Lord. Isaiah saw the Lord. Let me read from verse 1. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

[7 : 54] 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 threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. I don't know if you've ever been to a commissioning event of some kind.

Perhaps think of a graduation ceremony at university, or army graduation at Sandhurst, or an ordination service in a cathedral, perhaps, or even a coronation. They're austere events, full of pomp, designed to convey the importance of what's going on.

Well, the setting for Isaiah's commissioning makes each of those commissionings look very trivial in comparison. Because he was given a vision of the throne room of heaven.

The Lord himself is sitting on the throne, in all his splendour and glory. And so vast is he that just the train of his robe fills the entire earthly temple, the place where the heavenly king meets his earthly people.

[9 : 04] And just as a coronation might be attended by dignitaries and prime ministers and bishops, in attendance here in the heavenly courtroom are the heavenly beings, the seraphim.

And so terrifyingly awesome is this God, that even these heavenly creatures have to cover their eyes in his presence. More than that, the foundations shake, and the whole house is filled with smoke, a picture of God's awe-inducing presence.

And just notice in verse 3, what the heavenly beings say to each other. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.

As John was saying earlier, in Hebrew, holy, holy, holy, means holiest, the most holy one. Total, absolute holiness. So these angels are declaring God's complete purity and otherness, which is what holy really means.

God is set apart from us. He is unique. He is without sin. He is terrifyingly glorious. And the whole earth is filled with his glory. I wonder what we think it might be like to encounter God face to face.

[10:25] C.S. Lewis once wrote, Some people speak as if to stare into the face of absolute goodness will be fun. They need to speak again.

Because you see, the true God, the God of the Bible, is terrifyingly awesome, holy, and glorious. It would be an unimaginably frightening thing, as Isaiah discovered, to be in the presence of this God, as we are.

These verses remind us that God is so much bigger, so much holier, and so much scarier, than we so often think. He is the Lord of hosts, the commander of the heavenly armies.

He is the one so big, that the train of his road, fills the enormous temple. He is so holy, that even seraphim, have to cover their eyes in his presence. And he sits on his heavenly throne, ruling over the entire world, that is his.

I wonder if you notice that contrast, in verse 1. Isaiah receives his vision, in the year that King Isaiah died. There is a deliberate contrast here, between King Isaiah, who seemed to be in charge, a king who had started well, but had fallen through his own pride, if you read 2 Chronicles 26, and the true king, the Lord, who Isaiah saw sitting on his throne, high and exalted above all others.

[11:52] As Isaiah puts it at the end of verse 5, my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.

Unaware to all outside the throne room of God, Isaiah, after 52 years on the throne, was about to die.

But the Lord, reigns on his throne, forever. He is the real, eternal king. We so often, view our world, through worldly eyes, we think the Isaiah's of this world, sit on the throne.

We fear God has lost control, or that it's more sensible, to serve the rulers of this world, and their often ungodly agendas. But Isaiah 6, lifts back the curtain of heaven for us, and shows us that God is seated, firmly on his throne, and outlives all rivals.

And for Isaiah to be saved, and therefore to be fit, for the mission for which he will be sent, he first had to understand this. So for those of us here, who are Christian believers, I wonder if the God we know, the God we serve, the God we speak of, and the God we fear, is this God.

The God of absolute majesty, of utter holiness, and of awesome glory. Because unless we see God like this, we won't see our sin, for what it is, and we won't see our need, for salvation.

[13:25] So easy isn't it, to have a small view of God, or a man-centered view of him. But Isaiah 6, blows any such ideas, out of the water. The God of the Bible, isn't our buddy, or a divine life coach, or fairy godmother, who exists to meet our whims.

No, he's the king, the Lord of hosts. He is terrifying, in his holiness, and glory. And therefore, Israel's sin, and Isaiah's sin, and our sin, matters.

So Isaiah, saw the Lord. But notice also, that Isaiah, recognized his sin, and we'll begin to move, more quickly now. Chapter 5, it contained six woes, six pronouncements, of judgment, against Judah.

But chapter 6, contains a seventh, and final woe. A woe, of which Isaiah himself, is shockingly, the subject. Let's read verse 5. 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. You see, before the presence, of a holy God, Isaiah was no better, than the rest, of the people.

Sure, he may not have rejected God, in the overt ways, many of them had. But before the kind, of holy God, described in verses 1 to 3, no one can stand.

[15:00] We all merit his judgment. Things have gone wrong, for King Isaiah, when he desecrated the temple, in 2 Chronicles 26, and was struck down, with leprosy, rendering him unclean, for the rest of his life.

But here, Isaiah is also unclean. He's a man, of unclean lips, dwelling among a people, of unclean lips. He was no better off, than the rebellious people, and no better off, than the rebellious king.

And having been confronted, by God's glory, he knew he was lost, as he was. Moreover, as a man with unclean lips, he was not fit, for the preaching ministry, to which he was being called.

You see, those who see God, as he is, also see themselves, as they are. If we understand, the divine nature correctly, we'll understand, human nature, correctly.

Before holy God, we are lost, unclean, sinners. You may have read this week, of a secondary school, head teacher in London, not a Christian, being widely criticised, for tweeting her belief, in original sin, with some calling, for her to be sacked.

[16:14] The SNP, member of Scottish Parliament, Neil Gray, responded by saying, children are not born bad, children are born good, and I would suggest, trauma, poverty, and negative influences, of adults, are what drive, negative behaviour.

But this desire, to see humanity, as naturally good, is one that fails, to account, for the holiness, of God.

We're all unclean people, by nature, unfit, for relationship, with a holy God. Will, Louis, and Nathaniel, were reaffirming, their baptismal vows earlier, and of course, the reason why, some Christian parents, will take their children, for baptism as babies, is precisely, because of an understanding, that children, as they're born, are not naturally good, that they need washing, that all of us, before a holy God, are left wanting.

Charles Simeon, was one of the great preachers, of the 18th, and 19th century, ministering in Cambridge, for over 50 years. He was a man, like Isaiah, whose ministry, was underpinned, by an understanding, of his own sin, and unworthiness.

He once wrote, there are but two objects, that I have ever desired, to behold. The one is my own vileness, and the other, is the glory of God, in the face of Christ.

[17:35] And those two things, always go together, as they do here, in Isaiah 6. Understanding the glory of God, will lead us to see, the vileness, of our hearts.

So, Isaiah saw the Lord, and he recognised, and he recognised, his sin. But then he also, received God's salvation. Isaiah received, God's salvation.

Let's read on, from verse 6. Wonderful verses. Then one of the, 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.

Your guilt is taken away, and your sin, atoned for. What wonderful words, they must have been, for Isaiah to hear. And notice, Isaiah does nothing, to contribute, to his salvation.

A coal is simply, taken from the altar, touches his lips, and his guilt, is taken away, and sin, atoned for. Again, the context, is relevant here, I think.

[18:45] The reason, King Isaiah, the king at the time, had been struck, with leprosy, was because, he defiled the altar, by burning incense there, even though, he wasn't a priest. His uncleanness, in a sense, represented that, of the people.

The altar, was the place, of sacrifice, and atonement. And he failed, to understand, that he couldn't, make atonement, for himself. But here, from that same altar, atonement, comes to Isaiah.

And of course, we know, if we're Christians, that the altar, at the temple, points forward, to the sacrifice, of the Lord Jesus, prophesied, later in Isaiah, which brings, cleansing from sin, for all those, who put their trust in him.

Atonement is possible, because Jesus, has sacrificed, his own life, on the altar, of his cross, that unclean, people like us, might be forgiven, and stand, in his presence.

So, Isaiah's commissioning, for the ministry, recorded in the rest, of the book, begins with a terrifying, vision, of the awesome God, sitting on his throne.

[19:51] This leads Isaiah, to recognise his sin, and receive God's salvation. Conviction, leads to confession, which leads, to cleansing. But as well, as a terrifying vision, Isaiah 6, also records, a terrifying commission.

And that's our, other main heading, more briefly, a terrifying commission. It's noticeable, that the coal, from the altar, in verse 7, touches Isaiah's mouth, his lips.

Back in verse 5, his lips were unclean. But now, they've been cleansed, and so have been prepared, for the preaching ministry, to which he is about, to be commissioned. But what was he, to preach?

Well, let's read, from verse 8. 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.

And he said, 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.

[21 : 03] Having been saved, Isaiah is willing, to serve. And that's always a hallmark, of the saved person, a desire to serve the Lord. But the particular, unique commission, Isaiah was given, was very surprising.

Because it was, above all, a message, of judgment. A message, of judgment. Isaiah, in effect, is told that his preaching ministry, would be a total, failure.

Can you imagine it? Isaiah receives, this extraordinary vision of God, and then is told, to preach to the people, and tell them, that they won't understand, or perceive, what he's saying. Worse, he is, through his preaching ministry, to make the people's hearts hard, and to bring spiritual blindness, and deafness.

Rather than his ministry, bringing revival, Isaiah's ministry, would confirm, God's people in their sin, and God's judgment, against them. His role, was to be like that, of an oncologist, who has to give bad news, or the foreman of the jury, who has to announce, a guilty verdict, or the surveyor, who has to write off a building, because it's structurally, unsound, beyond repair.

And Isaiah's commission here, is a reminder to us, that faithful gospel ministry, won't always be successful, in a worldly sense. Many will reject it. As Isaiah tells us later, and we thought about earlier, God's word, will never return, will never return, to him empty.

[22 : 32] It will always accomplish, the purpose, for which it's sent. But that purpose, will sometimes, be to harden, or judge. And of course, this is exactly the response, which Isaiah's ministry, met.

So Isaiah 6, is I think there, partly to assure, the original readers, and us, that despite appearances, despite rejection, as Isaiah's ministry, was authentic. The rejection, the rejection he experienced, was actually a sign of this.

It was what God, told him to expect. It was the purpose, of his preaching. Often Isaiah 6, is taught as a kind of, model for service, where we're told, to put ourselves, into Isaiah's shoes, and say, here I am, send me Lord, for whatever service, God may wish us to do.

But while I'm sure, there are some lessons, that we can learn here, about being ready to serve.

These verses, aren't primarily, a model for us. We're not Isaiah. We're not given, the terrifying commission, he was given.

We're not to preach, the same message, he was. We're not Isaiah, in this passage, but the readers. And these verses, show us, we can have confidence, in everything Isaiah, will teach, even when it's uncomfortable.

[23 : 45] Because we see here, that he was commissioned, by God himself. And the importance, of these particular verses, are evident, from how they're picked up, in the New Testament, with regard to both, Jesus's and Paul's ministry.

So please, tell me if you would, to the New Testament, and Matthew chapter 13. Matthew chapter 13. It's always good practice, to see how the New Testament, understands or uses, Old Testament teaching.

And this is, one of a number of times, where Isaiah 6, is quoted. In fact, the Isaiah 6 language, of dull hearts, and deaf ears, and blind eyes, in many ways, sets the context, for Jesus's ministry, in the Gospels.

But for now, just look at Matthew 13, and verse 14. We're on page 986. Page 986. Matthew 13, 14. Jesus is explaining, why he speaks in parables.

And he says, of the people of his day, who were rejecting his ministry. Verse 14. Indeed, in their case, the prophecy, of Isaiah is fulfilled, that says, and then he quotes, from Isaiah 6, our passage.

[24 : 53] So, Jesus tells us, that the true fulfillment, of Isaiah 6, wasn't simply, in Isaiah's ministry, to a rebellious people, in the Old Testament. But came through, Jesus's own ministry, many years later, to the equally rebellious people, of his day.

Who are, of course, described by the Gospel writers, as having dull hearts, and ears that are deaf, and eyes that are blind. But just look how Jesus continues, in verse 16.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and for your ears, for they hear. Although they may not yet, have grasped it, at this point in the Gospels, that the disciples, like Isaiah, were themselves unclean, and needed atonement.

Jesus was telling them, that through their ministry, he would be forming, a new people of God, who would see, and hear. Perhaps look up, the final few verses, of the book of Acts later, where Paul, quotes from Isaiah 6, in a similar way.

Again using these verses, as a description, of the Jews of his day. But saying that, God's salvation, would therefore, go to the Gentiles, to the nations instead. And this brings us on, to the glimmer of hope, that we also find, in these verses.

[26 : 07] The glimmer of hope. Back in Isaiah 6 now. And in verses 11 and 12, we see again, that Isaiah's ministry, will lead to a terrible judgment, to exile.

But have a look at verse 13, the last verse, of our passage. We're told, and though a tenth, remain in it, in the land, it will be burned again, like a terebinth, or an oak, whose stump remains, when it is felt.

The holy seed, is its stump. The land will be judged, burned, but a stump, will remain, just like, a forest might regrow, years after a forest fire, because of one seed, that remained intact, or one stump, missed by the fire.

And this stump, we're told, will be the holy seed, or as the footnote says, holy offspring. Back in chapter 4, verse 2, we were introduced, to the branch of the Lord, which will be beautiful, and glorious, and which will bear fruit, among the survivors of Israel, those who survived the judgment. It's a great contrast, with the vineyard, that follows in chapter 5, whose branches, fail to bear fruit. And the question is, where will these branches, that bear fruit, come from? From where will the branch, of the Lord, arise?

[27 : 23] Well, here we get a little hint, because the stump, of this tree, will be the holy seed, or offspring. It's an idea, we'll see, developed in chapters 7 and 9, where Isaiah prophesied, the birth of a child, or offspring, in those famous, Christmas passages.

Or look on, a couple of pages, to chapter 11, and verse 1. Chapter 11, and verse 1. Just notice, the same language here.

There shall come forth, a shoot from the stump, same word, of Jesse, and a branch, from his roots, shall bear fruit. The glimmer of hope, in Isaiah 6, in Isaiah's ministry, who will bring an end, to the judgment of exile, and bear fruit, as Israel should have done, will be one, in David's line, on whom the spirit, of the Lord, shall rest.

And because Isaiah, is one long book, and it's easy, in a long book, to lose our bearings, I want us to finish, by going to probably, the most famous passage, in the book, to the servant song, in Isaiah 52, and 53.

So please turn there, before we finish. Isaiah 52, and 53. And we're now, on page 742, page 742. Many of us, will be familiar, with Isaiah 53, one of the servant songs, that we get in the later, chapters of the book, which describe, the servant, on whom God's spirit rests.

[28 : 53] And again, the horticultural imagery, which runs throughout the book, is in view. Verse 2, have a look. For he, the servant, grew up before him, like a young plant, and like a root, out of dry ground.

This is the fruitful seed, or stump, or root, or branch, prophesied earlier, in the book. But have you noticed, before, how Isaiah 53, is introduced, at the start of the song?

The song starts, at verse 13, of chapter 52. Behold, my servant, shall act wisely. He shall be high, and lifted up.

Do you recognise, that phrase? In other words, this servant, who will be despised, rejected, and crushed, in chapter 53, is none other, than the Lord, Isaiah saw, sitting on his throne, in Isaiah 6, who was also high, and lifted up.

And what would he do? Verse 15, so shall he sprinkle, many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths, because of him. For that which has not been told them, they see.

[29 : 58] And that which they have not heard, they understand. Do you see the deliberate contrast with, and reversal of Isaiah 6? In Isaiah 6, the people of Judah, would respond to Isaiah's message, by not seeing, and understanding.

But in Isaiah 53, those who have not been told, the many nations, of verse 15, of chapter 52, will see, and will understand, as they're sprinkled, by the suffering servant, in his death.

Why does that matter? Well, because the application, of Isaiah 6 for us, is neither to be like Isaiah, we're not Isaiah, and our message, is not the same as his.

Nor are we like, the people of Judah, and of Isaiah's day, whose hearts were hardened. No, we're the many nations, of Isaiah 52, who can see, and can understand, and can be cleansed, because the holy stump, of Isaiah 6, grew up to be, the suffering servant, who died, that our guilt, might be taken away, and sin atoned for.

The application, of Isaiah 6 for us, is that we don't need, to fear the judgment, described there, but are to look, to the stump, the holy seed, the Lord Jesus Christ, who despite being, the one high, and lifted up, the holy God, whose glory fills the earth, was yet willing, to make himself low, and stoop down, to rescue sinners, like you, and me.

[31 : 29] Shall we pray, and thank God, for that wonderful truth. some words, from Isaiah 40, the second of these two, great commissions, Isaiah is given, which, set the trajectory, for the two, main parts of the book.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God, speak tenderly, to Jerusalem, and cry to her, that her warfare, is ended, that her iniquity, is pardoned, that she has received, from the Lord's hand, double, for all her sins.

Our Heavenly Father, we acknowledge, this morning, that we are those, who cannot stand, in your presence, that we are people, of unclean lips, dwelling, among people, of unclean lips.

And so, how we thank you, for the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who sits, on the throne, and yet who is willing, to stoop low, as the suffering servant, to die on the cross, to make atonement, for our sins. And we thank you, that because of him, because of the holy seed, we can be comforted, that our iniquity, can be pardoned, and that we can stand, in your presence, as forgiven sinners.

[32 : 37] We praise you, afresh for that, this morning, and pray that you, would give us, a new grasp, of your glory, and of the wonder, of your salvation. And we ask it, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.