

The God who is God

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 6 and we're reading the whole chapter. 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 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.

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.

[1 : 32] And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I, send me.

And he said, Go, and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

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.

And I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until the cities lie waste without inhabitants, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste.

[2 : 44] 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 the terebinth, or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump. Again, he began to teach beside the sea.

And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat, and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land.

And he was teaching them many things in parables. And in his teaching he said to them, Listen. Listen. A sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. And immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil.

[3 : 57] And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

And other seeds fell into good soil, and produced grain, growing up and increasing, and yielding thirtyfold, and sixtyfold, and a hundredfold.

And he said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables.

And he said to them, To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. But for those outside, everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see, but not perceive, and may indeed hear, but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.

And he said to them, Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? The sower sowed the word, and these are the ones along the path where the word is sown.

[5 : 19] When they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground. The ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy.

And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while. Then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.

And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Well, good morning, everyone. Let's pray as we start. Those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

[6 : 39] Heavenly Father, please would we be good soil this morning. Help us to hear your word, to accept it, and may we bear great fruit in the light of it.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, I wonder if you could be turning back to page 689. That's Isaiah chapter 6.

And as you're doing so, of course, this is a holiday season. At the time of year when our conversations often turn to comparing where we've been on our summer holidays or perhaps where we're heading if you haven't yet been away.

Here's an idea for next year. Why not go to Garenja? It's a small tourist village in western Norway. It's home to some of the most spectacular scenery in the world.

It sits next to one of the many Norwegian fjords with a number of stunning waterfalls nearby. And as the water tumbles down the mountainsides into the fjords below.

[7 : 43] Lonely Planet named it as the best travel destination in Scandinavia. And it's listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Tempted?

Well, there's something else I need to tell you. All is not quite as idyllic as it may appear. Garenja is under constant threat from the mountain Akeneset.

Geologists reckon that a large chunk of the mountain could erode into the fjord. Such a collapse may well cause a tsunami that could destroy much of the village.

And it's difficult to know quite how long you'd have, but maybe about ten minutes notice that the tsunami was coming. Now that further geological information is an important reality check.

It's vital information for the residents of Garenja. But it's also an important reality check for potential tourists planning their next holiday.

[8 : 45] Well, this morning in Isaiah chapter 6, we're given three reality checks on eternally significant issues. What God is really like.

What we are really like. And why the world rejects God's message. And these reality checks occur in a remarkable historical event as the prophet Isaiah comes face to face with God himself.

Now this occurs in the year that King Uzziah of Judah died, which we know from historians occurred in 740 BC. Judah is the southern kingdom formed when the nation of Israel split into two around 930 BC.

So around 200 years earlier. And if you've been here for any of the previous three Sunday mornings, you'll remember that when Isaiah was ministering in the mid-8th century, it was a time of great political uncertainty.

In human terms, the freedom and security of God's people is threatened by the rise of Assyria. The Assyrians are threatening the neighboring countries. And the issue for God's people is who will they trust?

[9 : 58] Will they trust human power and possessions? Or will they trust in God's provision for them? And the signs from the first five chapters of Isaiah are far from encouraging.

Judah's capital, Jerusalem, the same city where King David ruled as God's appointed king, was described in chapter 1 as a faithless city, not the faithful city that God expected.

And in chapter 5, which we looked at last week, Judah is described as God's vineyard. God expected good grapes and only received rotten grapes.

And as a result, if you look back at chapter 5, verse 25, we read this, The anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them, and the mountains quaked, and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets.

So is there any hope for God's people? On this bleak canvas, there have just been some hints of hope. So we have had a picture of refuge and shelter from the storm.

[11 : 15] But it raises this very real question, how will God continue to relate to his people despite this ongoing rebellion? And how can there be any hope, given God's righteous anger at their ongoing sin?

Given the pervasiveness of sin in our world, in our community, and if we're honest, in our very own lives, it raises the same questions for us too.

On the back of the service sheet, you'll see an outline of this morning's talk, and you'll see there our first point. Heavenly reality, the Lord's glorious reign. So verse 1 of chapter 6.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord. In 740 BC, Isaiah saw the Lord with his own eyes. It was a personal encounter that was literally awesome. This is Isaiah experiencing the heavenly reality. The Lord God reigning in his majestic glory.

[12 : 27] So notice first the Lord's position. He is high and lifted up, in his rightful place, seated on his throne.

He's living in his temple, the place where God rightfully lives throughout the Old Testament. Next, notice the Lord's power. He's so majestic that the train of his robe fills the temple.

Now, intrigued by garments with long trains, I did some web-based research. For wedding dresses, a royal or monarch wedding train apparently extends a yard or more on the floor.

As one website puts it, it's the most dramatic option, and often requires assistance from a flower girl. Apparently, Kate Middleton's train was just less than nine feet long, and Princess Diana wore a 25-foot-long train.

That's over seven and a half meters long. Well, this train on the Lord's royal robe fills the whole temple. And I take it that's a very great deal longer than seven and a half meters.

[13 : 36] It symbolizes his ultimate power and authority. And we see that, too, from the way that the temple shakes when the seraphim speak.

Such is the Lord's power over the building. And notice, finally, the Lord's purity, shown both in how the seraphim behave and in what they say.

So four of their six wings are used to cover themselves, given the purity they need to be in his presence. And their call to each other is holy, holy, holy.

This threefold repetition emphasizes the Lord's purity. Well, I don't know whether you've ever had a life-changing experience, for good or bad, where your encounter with reality has had a lasting impact.

In recent months, I've had a client who describes herself as a survivor of the World Trade Center attack. So she was there at 9-11 in 2001, when two planes were flown into the Twin Towers.

[14 : 46] She witnessed the horror of the towers catching fire and of people desperately trying to escape. And for her, life has never been the same since.

That event continues to dominate her thinking. She suffers from ongoing symptoms and has never been in an airplane since. Well, for Isaiah, this is an event of a similar magnitude.

He saw the one true Lord in all his majesty, sitting on his throne. Life for Isaiah would never be the same again, as we'll see when we get to the second point.

But first, let's think for a moment as to how what Isaiah saw ought to impact us. I take it that it should, because Isaiah has not kept this vision to himself.

It's recorded for the benefit of his immediate listeners and recorded for our benefit too. It's an insight into the heavenly reality.

[15 : 51] This isn't some fleeting appearance of the Lord on his throne. We know that because in Revelation 4, at the very end of the Bible, John has an almost identical vision of the Lord on his throne.

There are four living creatures, each with six wings, on each side of the throne. And John tells us they never cease to say, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

Well, Tim Peake's exploits in space show our fascination with what lies beyond the earth. Well, here, the cosmic curtain has been drawn back and we can glimpse the ultimate spiritual reality.

Our insight, thanks to what Isaiah has recorded, is far greater than that of Tim Peake. We can see the Lord God reigning on his throne.

Well, I wonder, is that the way that we view God? Or is our image of God somewhat less majestic, less powerful, and less awesomely pure than the insight given to Isaiah?

[17:09] Perhaps our problem is not that we have too small a view of God the Father, but that we don't spend much time thinking about what his majestic rule really looks like.

So imagine this morning, you're in Isaiah's shoes and the Lord God is appearing to us. Because what Isaiah saw is the spiritual reality, the Lord reigning on his throne.

And if we paused to reflect on his awesome power and authority, I wonder whether it could be truly life-changing for us too.

It certainly was for Isaiah. So to the second point, human reality, sin, yet potential salvation. Isaiah's immediate response is a significant one.

Faced with the Lord's glory, his first thought is his own inadequacy and that of his people. Look at verse 5. Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.

[18:18] Isaiah is convicted of his own unworthiness and that of the people of Judah and confesses that to God. That's his natural reaction, faced with the Lord's purity and majesty, to recognize how far short he falls from God's standards.

Well, I don't know about you, but Olympic fever has hit the Gardner household. Sports that for the last four years have never really registered have suddenly become engrossing. Diving, gymnastics, and even fencing have become of huge excitement.

We want to see how the British athletes measure up, whether they can become the gold standard by winning the gold medal, or whether they fall horribly short of their own standards and that of the other competitors.

You may have seen the look on Lewis Smith's face as he fell off the pommel horse too early. It was one of shame and embarrassment. He literally fell short of the standards he and others expected.

Well, in a far more serious way, Isaiah realizes from his personal encounter with God, how far short he falls of God's majesty and God's glory.

[19:34] He knows that by himself he has no hope of living with such a majestically pure and powerful God. And his reaction is one of woe, both for himself and for his people.

Well, is that our reaction when we reflect on God's glory and majesty? All too often, I confess it isn't mine. And I guess that's because I have a stunted view of God's greatness and of my own total inadequacy.

Isaiah's self-diagnosed problem is his unclean lips. But remarkably, there's a perfect solution for the lip problem. Not lip salve, not even lipstick.

These can only go skin deep. Rather, and surprisingly perhaps, a burning coal. A coal touches his unclean lips and the seraphim explains the effect.

Verse 7, Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for. So how is it then that a burning coal can have this cleansing impact?

[20:53] Well, we're only given a hint in this passage, but I think the hint is the altar from which the burning coal was taken. Altars were places where sacrifices were burnt to atone for sin.

The coal from this altar has atoned for Isaiah's sin. And it points forward to a perfect sacrifice that can offer a perfect solution.

salvation. This is what we read in Hebrews chapter 9. But as it is, Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

It's God himself who's provided the solution for Isaiah, and it's God himself in the person of Jesus Christ who provides the solution for us. It's through the sacrifice of God's only son that we can live with a holy and awesome God.

Well, if you're here this morning and you would not call yourself a Christian, then you're very welcome. The same solution offered to Isaiah is offered to everyone who recognizes their sin and cries out to God for salvation.

[22:14] Our sin can also be atoned for and our guilt can also be taken away. We can live as forgiven sinners because we have a greater Savior.

If that's news to you, then do speak to Simon or speak to me afterwards and we can talk about that further. But the effect for Isaiah is a newfound confidence.

No longer is it, woe is me, but remarkably, send me. So we read in verse 8, the Lord himself asks, whom shall I send and who will go for us?

Then I said, here am I, send me. When I read that verse, I was struck by its simplicity, a simple question and an immediate response.

Send me. Isaiah doesn't say, let me just wait and see if anybody else volunteers. He doesn't say, let me discuss it with my family first. He just says, send me.

[23 : 26] That's faith that takes God at his word. And why shouldn't he? He has seen the King, the Lord of hosts. He's had his guilt taken away.

God is for him, so who can be against him? He need fear nothing. I think there's a challenge here for our play it safe, softly softly approach to Christian service.

Sometimes we know what we should be doing, but we invent excuses for failing to do it. We hold back from serving God wholeheartedly because we fear man more than we fear and respect God. We want to serve God, but we don't see God as awesomely in control of the very situation we fear. When was the last time we prayed, send me?

Given the solution provided for Isaiah and Isaiah's willingness to serve God, our final point comes as something of a shock. So, thirdly, hard-hearted reality, gospel rejection.

[24 : 43] We might have expected that the transformed Isaiah, serving God by speaking God's words to God's people, would bring about a similar transformation in their lives.

But God warns Isaiah that his message will be rejected. As the sovereign ruler over all the nations and over the future, God knows the response his message will generate.

That's not because God is powerless to save his people, far from it. We've just seen how he has saved Isaiah. No, it's because they get what they deserve.

After all, they ought to have been producing good grapes, but have produced only bad grapes.

They ought to have been walking in the light of the Lord, but instead have been worshipping idols of silver and gold.

So in verse 10 of our passage, we read this, Isaiah's task is to make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy and blind their eyes.

[25 : 54] God can't be criticized for deafening them to a message that their hard hearts don't want to hear. They get what they deserve from a holy God, his righteous anger and his divine judgment.

At first sight, that may seem rather shocking, almost unfair, but throughout the first five chapters of Isaiah, we've seen how God has given them a clear choice.

Look back for a moment to chapter 1, verse 18, on page 684. chapter 1, verse 18.

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

[27 : 02] That choice is not available forever. There comes a time in many people's lives when their senses are so dulled to spiritual reality that it's too late.

That's the spiritual reality check that God gives to Isaiah, and that's also the spiritual reality check today. As we saw in our second reading, Jesus himself quotes Isaiah's words to explain why he taught in parables.

As in the parable of the sower itself, there are some who hear God's message of salvation, accept it, and bear fruit. They have the secret of the kingdom of God.

But for those who choose to reject it, whether at the very start, or sometimes later because of worldly cares, or personal difficulties, God denies them insight into a true understanding of his kingdom.

Why? Well, because they don't deserve that insight. Isaiah asked God how long this will continue. Verse 11 is the response.

[28 : 12] Back in chapter 6. verse 11. Verse 11. Verse 11. Verse 11. Until cities lie waste without inhabitants and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away.

It's a picture of the Babylonian invasion of Judah, when God's people were taken into exile to serve the Babylonians. The Babylonian empire followed the Assyrian empire.

God spared his people invasion by the Assyrians, but used the Babylonians to punish his rebellious people. And yet amidst all the predicted destruction, there's a glimmer of hope.

Look at verse 13. There's a stump remaining that Isaiah refers to as the holy seed. God's vineyard will be replanted with this seed.

Jesus says to his disciples, I am the vine, you are the branches. And as Isaiah's ministry continues, we will see how these twin themes of judgment and salvation will continue to be worked out.

[29 : 30] But as we conclude, let's think about this final reality check. Does the prospect of God's message being rejected stop us sharing it with those around us in the first place?

It didn't stop Isaiah from speaking God's message to his countrymen. And it shouldn't stop us from sharing the message of salvation with our friends and neighbors.

After all, this rejection is not outside God's plan, but part of it. And as we learn from the parable of the sower, rejection is not the universal response.

Some will receive God's word and accept it and go on to bear great fruit. Well, as I've reflected on the reality checks in this chapter, I think an insight for me has been how I can become bolder about sharing the salvation that God offers.

I think I need a clearer picture of the heavenly reality of God's majesty, and God's rule over the whole world, and a deeper conviction of the human reality of guilt, but also that in Christ, my guilt has been fully taken away.

[30 : 53] Well, in a moment, we'll have a chance to think a little further about some of these ideas in some discussion questions that should be at the bottom of the outline. But first, let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for revealing to us this morning your awesome majesty and our natural unworthiness.

Thank you that in Christ our guilt has been taken away and our sin atoned for, and we are fully equipped to serve you just as Isaiah was.

God's peace. Please give us a deeper conviction of this spiritual reality and a greater confidence to speak up as your people, whatever the reaction.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[31 : 56] Amen. Amen. Amen.