

Isaiah's call & encounter with God

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[0 : 00] Well, do please be seated. And you've got those Bibles with you. Do open them up again to Isaiah chapter 6, page 691.

! We're going to spend the next few minutes there together. According to the Scots poet Robbie Burns, the best gift we could have would be to see ourselves as others see us.

That can be very helpful, can't it? It can save us free money, a blunder, as he wrote. But I beg to differ with the great poet. I think the best gift we can have is to see God as he truly is and to see ourselves as he sees us.

Isaiah has that kind of encounter in our passage today, doesn't he? And it was an encounter that radically changed both his self-perception and his life's direction. See, it wasn't the perilous security situation or the appalling spiritual state of the nation which summoned up something in Isaiah to become a great minister and begin his ministry.

It was meeting with God. Seeing him in all his glory that changed Isaiah and redirected his life. And if we let God do his work in us today through his word and by his spirit, that will have the same effect on us.

[1 : 21] You ready for that today? Meeting with God? Being changed? Let's pray, shall we? Father, we come to you this morning and ask that you'd help us to see more of you and more of your glory.

That we might see ourselves rightly and serve you as we should. Lord, be at work among us now, we pray. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Firstly, then, Isaiah's vision of our glorious God. Maybe it was the darkness of the days that had driven Isaiah into the temple on that particular day.

Maybe it was his regular practice. We don't know. Whatever he was doing there, that particular day was more dramatic than he could have imagined. He saw a vision of God that would change his life.

Verse 1. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

[2 : 26] Although God is spirit, there are times recorded for us in the Bible when God made himself visible in a way that helps those then and us now understand his greatness.

And on that day, Isaiah had such a vision. A glorious vision of God in all his glory. High and exalted above all other kings and rulers and powers. Seated on a mighty throne, surrounded by angels of fire.

Isaiah doesn't see everything clearly. But his vision of God is so grand that he says, The train of the Lord's robe filled the whole temple. Maybe you've heard that phrase before and you think, Wow, I wonder what that means.

Well, one commentator explains it like this. If just a hem of his garment filled the temple. How big was the throne? And how big was the one sitting on the throne?

In other words, words failed to describe the greatness of God. The God of Isaiah's vision is vast and mighty. As are the angels Isaiah saw.

[3 : 31] Yet they are to serve God and to do his bidding and to praise his glory. They're not there so we might look at them and go, Wow, aren't the angels great? They're there to show us how great God is.

And what are they crying? Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. These are beings so awesome that at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the thresholds shake.

In Hebrew, repeating the same word again, that turns it from an ordinary noun to a superlative. You're thinking, what on earth is he talking about there? I don't remember my English grammar.

So writing gold, gold would change gold into pure gold. But here, it's not just holy, holy. It is holy, holy, holy.

And that isn't three times as holy. That is holiness cubed, if you like. God's otherness, his power, majesty and divine moral purity is off the scale.

[4 : 31] Far beyond anything we can comprehend. But seeing all of this, this amazing vision, doesn't cause Isaiah to respond with a, Wow, what an amazing sight.

I just wish I had my camera. How does he respond? Woe. Woe is me. I'm a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.

Suddenly, in the awesome beauty of God's presence, Isaiah is deeply conscious of the unbridgeable gulf between him and his creator, between him as a sinful human being and the righteous and holy God.

And remember that Isaiah is one of the good guys. His family and friends would have thought of him as a faithful, upright, honest, godly man. But when he came face to face with God, he realised just how far short of God's perfect standards he had fallen.

And in that moment, he knew the depths and weight of his own sin and guilt. It's hard to get our heads around that feeling. But imagine turning up to a dinner party, wearing smart, casual clothes, only to find that everyone else is there in white tie.

[5 : 45] You've gone to a lot of effort to look as smart as you do, but all of a sudden you feel terribly underdressed. Everyone else is in luxury, white tie suits, haute couture ball gowns.

And however smart you felt you were before, now you feel like you've come in straight from the garden. Multiply that a thousandfold. That's what Isaiah felt. Woe to me.

I am ruined. Isaiah recognised the depth of his sin, the rottenness of his own heart, and he knew that there was nothing he could do to make himself clean.

Without divine intervention, Isaiah knew that he was done for. So here's the first challenge I want to bring you today. Is our view of God big enough?

How great and awesome is the God you believe in? When you think of God, what do you imagine? Is he a God awesome in majesty, unlimited in power and authority, perfect in holiness?

[6 : 51] When you think of him, are you thinking of a God who really does have not just the world in his hands, but the entire creation in his hands? Or have we made him just small enough to fit into our Sunday best?

Just strong enough to give us a bit of a hand when we need one? Friends, we must not shrink God down to size. We must not make God feel tame.

Being in the presence of God as we gather Sunday by Sunday to worship and meet him in his word and around his table should never make us feel comfortable. It's meant to humble us before God's majesty and holiness so that he can then, by his grace, lift us up and draw us to himself, anoint us with his love.

It is an awesome thing that we're doing today. It may feel very ordinary. Maybe you've been doing this for years and years and years and it's just what you do on Sunday. This is an awesome thing.

We're gathering in a building dedicated to the praise and worship of God. He is with us by his spirit. His word is being read and we are singing his praises. That is an awesome thing.

[8 : 07] Do you feel the weight of that? This is not just a habit. This is an awesome moment. We are here to meet with and worship and hear from the one and only God, a God of infinite beauty, of unlimited power, one who is perfect in holiness, mighty in works and who has unfathomable grace and inexhaustible love.

And it should shake us in our boots and draw us to our knees. It should make us cry, woe is me for I am a person of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and here I am in the presence of God.

Is your view of God big enough? Wonderfully, Isaiah's cry of shame and repentance doesn't lead to condemnation just as ours won't either for repentance always draws from God an outpouring of grace and mercy.

So secondly, God's gracious mercy to his sinful servant. Verse six, Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand that he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my lips and said, See, this has touched your lips.

Your guilt is taken away. Your sin atoned for. The coal taken from the altar is placed onto Isaiah's lips. But instead of setting him alight, what does it do?

[9 : 35] It cleanses him. His guilt is taken away. He is forgiven. But notice that coal was taken from the altar. It's taken from the place of sacrifice where sin was atoned for, where God's wrath was turned away, where people could be cleansed.

And although those Old Testament sacrifices could not in themselves atone for sin, what they did is they drew their effectiveness by pointing to the one sacrifice that would.

They all pointed, all of those lamps, year after year after year, pointed forward to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. The death of Jesus on the cross, dying in our place for our sin as our substitute.

That all who come to him might, like Isaiah who received that coal, find forgiveness and cleansing. So do you know the wonder of that?

Have you realised both the depth of your sin and the true value of the mercy that God has poured out upon you? It took a close encounter with God for Isaiah to see his own sinfulness.

[10 : 47] But unless we recognise just how sinful we are, we will never begin to grasp the true value of Jesus' death and God's forgiveness. For us to see God's grace as truly amazing, we need to see our sin as truly appalling.

I became a Christian at the age of about seven. As you can imagine, the list of my sins then were not perhaps the most grievous ones. There's only so many things you can do at the age of seven.

But even then I knew God's forgiveness. I didn't realise how much I needed it until much, much later. Until the depth of my sinfulness and wicked heart showed itself properly through my words and deeds.

At that point I knew. And at that point, Is that true for you?

So here's that second challenge. Is our view of ourselves honest enough? Isaiah may have been one of the best people in his generation, but when he came face to face with God's holiness and recognised the true state of his own heart, he instantly knew that he was lost.

[12 : 13] See, it's possible for us to feel quite self-satisfied. We look at the list of sins, the things that other people do and say, Lord, I thank you that I'm not like those sinners over there.

You know, I'm a good person. I'm a nice person. I'm not like them. Are we busy doing that? Or day by day, are we letting God's spirit apply his word to our lives and show us where we need to turn from our sin and seek his cleansing?

Maybe that worries you. Maybe you'd rather not come to God and be that open with him because frankly, you'd rather not change. Having God search us and show us our faults and our wicked ways would be crushing, absolutely, if it were not also true for the knowledge of his mercy on us and on all who truly turn to him and seek his forgiveness.

That's why God had mercy on Isaiah. That's why God's had mercy on me. That's why many of you know that. And if you don't yet know that, then he will have mercy on you.

You can today know the joy of God's amazing grace. You have to be honest and you have to ask him and he will give it.

[13 : 32] But there is a warning in this passage, isn't there? It comes a little later on. See, there are many here who hear God's call and turn away. And as they do that, their hearts grow harder as a result.

That will be true for us too. If we continually turn away from God's prompting and calling, we become deaf. If you have sin to confess, confess it.

If you are outside God's kingdom today, then come in. If you need a saviour, then ask. Don't wait. Today is the day of salvation. Is our view of God grand enough, great enough?

Is our view of ourselves honest enough? Here's the third thing from this passage. Isaiah's difficult call. By the end of verse 7, Isaiah is on cloud nine, isn't he?

He's been down in the depths, crushed by the weight of sin and guilt upon him until that angel brings the coal. He is down in the depths. But by the end of verse 7, he is on cloud nine, as the hymn writer puts it.

[14 : 42] He has been ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven. So when God asks for volunteers, whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Isaiah is like one of the little children in primary school classes when teachers ask for someone to go on an errand.

They're all going, pick me, pick me, pick me. Isaiah's like that. I'll go. He's so overwhelmed by God's love and mercy and grace that he volunteers before he knows what the job entails.

And maybe that's just as well because it's a hard task, isn't it? The Lord said, verse 9, go and tell this people, be ever hearing, but never understanding.

Be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused. Make their ears dull. Close their eyes. Otherwise, they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.

You want to be a messenger, Isaiah? Fantastic. That's really great news. But let me warn you that as you go out with this message, no one or almost no one is going to hear it. No one's going to listen to you.

[15 : 47] They might hear the words, but it won't make sense. And if they do understand what you mean, they won't believe for a moment that it applies to them. So instead of stirring people to turn back to God, your preaching, Isaiah, is simply going to harden people's hearts so that they cannot repent.

That's your mission. How do you feel about that now? Imagine being a lifeguard on Bondi Beach. Your job is to raise the warning signal if sharks approach.

But you find that every time you do that, people ignore you. In fact, the more you raise the alarm, the more people rush into the water. Wouldn't be a very satisfying job, would it?

That's the task Isaiah has got here. And it's not that his message would be incomprehensible or that he didn't have the skills to communicate clearly. In chapter 28, Isaiah explains that he used such simple words in his messages that people were cross with him and told him to go back and teach Sunday school.

Go back to kindergarten. Teach the babies, Isaiah. No, it was because every time the people turned their backs on God, their hearts became harder still.

[17 : 04] And so rather than bringing life and turning people back to God, the effect of his ministry was to drive people further away. Every time they heard his words, it would make it harder for them to hear later and repent later on.

And what's interesting is that these are the most, we said last week, that Isaiah is the most quoted book in the New Testament. These are the most quoted words from the book of Isaiah in the New Testament.

Time and time again, they come up. The apostles used them to explain how hard it is for people to hear and accept the gospel of Jesus. And I have to say, I know how they feel.

Over the years of being a vicar, I've taken countless couples through marriage prep and baptism classes and shared the good news of Jesus with them. I've taken dozens more through exploring Christianity courses and seen them walk away at the end, not following Jesus.

Far, far more people have sat in the pews in different churches week after week, heard me speak about Jesus and his love, heard me call them to a life of repentance and obedient faith.

[18 : 14] And to be honest, it's been as if sometimes I've been speaking a different language. The words have just bounced off and fallen to the floor. And if you've been someone who's been trying to share your faith with someone in your family for many, many years and you've seen them just go, no, I'm not interested.

Do you know how that feels? Do you know how that feels? It is hard. This is the heartbreaking,! This is the heartbreaking, energy-sapping reality of Christian witness. It's our calling, but it is hard.

No wonder then Isaiah in verse 11 says, Lord, how long? How long am I going to have to do this for? How long am I going to have to keep giving this message and have people ignore it?

A year? Two years? Five? Ten? God's answer in verses 11 to 13 is that it would never be enough. The hearts of the people had become so hard, so callous, that now God's judgment was inevitable.

acceptable. Except that because of God's grace and mercy, God's judgment would not result in a complete destruction of his people.

[19 : 27] Did you notice that? Here's the fourth lesson. God's wonderful promise. Just as tree stumps can start to sprout again after the main trunk has been cut down to a low stump level, so God's people would not be utterly wiped out.

If you walk over to, I think it's Courtney Park on the edge, just by the tennis courts, you'll see a tree there that's been, it was obviously an enormous tree, it's been cut down almost to about that, about a foot high.

And yet out the side of that now there is a tree that's sprouting again. Branches coming up that are maybe eight, ten, twelve feet up now. There was nothing there a little while ago.

That's the picture here. In time, this holy stump would spring forth again after God's judgment would come new life. After 70 years of exile in Babylon, the people would come home.

And as we follow the trajectory of the Old Testament, we find it's from one of these stumps, the stump of Jesse, that Jesus comes. The one who brings God's full expression of his life to the world.

[20 : 39] See, friends, wonderfully, with God there is always grace in the midst of his judgment. There is always undissolved mercy in the midst of his wrath. There is resurrection in the midst of death.

Despite the repeated unfaithfulness of his Old Testament people, God would keep his promises. He would draw a people to himself from all nations, from every tribe and tongue.

And although the New Testament church, and I include us in that, have failed to live as we should, still today, God's mercy and grace is available. And still through us, that good news will go out to all who believe.

So here's the final challenge as I close. Is our response to God's mercy brave enough and wholehearted enough? Is it brave enough? Is it brave enough and wholehearted enough?

Isaiah's call was far from easy. Following Jesus isn't easy. It is a hard task. Being true disciples of Jesus is not simply about believing one or two facts and then turning up in church every now and again.

[21 : 49] It is a life of following him. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to die to ourselves, to take up our cross and follow. That means being with Jesus, growing like Jesus and living for Jesus.

Being with him, making time to learn about Jesus through his word in church, in small groups and on our own. It means growing like Jesus, allowing him to shine his light into the darkest parts of our lives and reshape our character so that we become more like him.

And it means living for Jesus, obeying him in all things, taking off that crown of independence that says, my life, my way, and letting Jesus be Lord of all areas of our lives so that we live more and more in obedience to him.

When we do that, we are called, aren't we, to be his ambassadors, to go out and make more disciples as we live and tell the good news of Jesus that we've taken in and are living with because it's him we are following.

But like Isaiah, there will also be a specific call for us. It's unlikely to be as dramatic as the one Isaiah had. You can, thank you Lord for that.

[23 : 09] But as the old hymn puts it, there is a work for Jesus only you can do. Where is the Lord calling you to serve in a fresh way?

To whom is he sending you with his message about his son? Obeying the Lord always comes at a cost as Isaiah experienced.

Some people will mock, others won't understand. Many will simply close their ears and not want to listen. Turning our backs on our old way of life may be hard but that is the life of a true disciple.

Living for Jesus is not easy. And why should it be? Because we are the disciples of one who left the glory of heaven behind to take on human flesh and then take up his own cross and give up his life for us.

That's, he is the one we follow. That is the pattern we follow. But as you count the cost, remember the benefits Jesus brings. Full and free forgiveness, adoption into God's family, the filling of his spirit, bringing a peace, a joy, a purpose that this world cannot give and the promise that one day, just like Isaiah, we will come face to face with God in all his glory and enjoy his presence forever.

[24 : 32] We hold on to those things. Surely we can then step out in greater courage and faith and be brave enough to obey God's call on us just as Isaiah did.

That one day changed Isaiah's life. How will today change yours? My prayer is that we all might grasp more of God's glory, that we would see ourselves rightly and come to him for his mercy.

And having done that, that we might then in gratitude and trust earnestly seek where God is calling us to serve and when he answers as he will, that we answer his call in the same way that Isaiah did.

Here I am. I'll go. Send me. You ready for that? I hope so. Amen.