

The Centre

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[0 : 00] Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. And the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim.

Each had six wings. And 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. And I said, this is Isaiah speaking, 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 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 I am, send me.

[1 : 08] And he said, Go and say to this people, say to Israel, 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, 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 in a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land, and though a tenth remain in it, they will be burned again like the terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is fell.

The holy seed is its stump. So Isaiah was a prophet. He was a righteous, honorable, holy man. He was a man of standing and reputation.

Scholars tell us he was probably related to the royal line, the royal family in Israel. And as such, he went to the temple to worship God, and to meet with others that were there.

But when he went, something very odd happened, very unexpected happened. Israel, Isaiah saw the one person that he didn't expect to see in the temple. God.

[2 : 25] It should be obvious. He's going to the house of God, and he should expect to see God, but he was not expecting to see it. And we laugh, but I think we're the same. We come to gather together on a Sunday morning, and we expect to see each other.

We expect to hear from God, at least hear his word. We might even have an experience, you know, if the music is good enough, if the speaker is good enough and at least isn't wearing a sweater vest and looking silly.

But we don't really expect to see God. We don't expect to really encounter God. But when Isaiah went to the temple, what did he see? Verse 1. In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on the throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

The train of his robe filled the whole temple with glory. The temple was this massive structure. You know, the train of a robe, the only place I can think of that we still have trains and robes is some weddings, and it's sort of the furthest thing, the furthest bride part of the bride is the train of her robe, and it's not usually the most important part.

You don't see a lot of people framing photographs from their wedding, and there's the groom, you know, his head by the train of the bride, and that's the centerpiece. And yet even this furthest away from God part of God fills the temple with glory, and it completely knocks Isaiah to the ground, basically.

[3 : 54] Verse 2. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings, and with two he covered his face, 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 filled with his glory. So there's these angels, these seraphim. And literally, the word means burning ones. When we think of angels, we often think of those cute cherubs in the Precious Moments collection or something like that.

But here, this word means a burning one. We get the image of this great being that's on fire. It's so filled with glory. It's so glorious that it's on fire.

And even this glorious being can't look directly at God, because with the six wings, two of them are covering its eyes, two of them are covering its feet to cover itself, and then just with two, it's flying. And then the glory of God just even eclipses these burning ones. And the angels call out to each other, and they say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

[5 : 00] The whole earth is filled with his glory. In English, we don't really get this repetition. Holy, holy, holy. Why just keep repeating yourself? But in Hebrew, repetition is used for emphasis.

It's used to communicate the superlative. So, for example, there's a place in Genesis where an army is fleeing after a battle, and they're running away, and it says that the men fell into deep pits, or some translations say atar pits.

But in the Hebrew, they're called pit pits. The men fell into pit pits. And what it's meant to communicate is these aren't just your regular pits that people can get out of. These are deep and dangerous pits. They're not just pits.

They're pit pits. And so that's kind of how Hebrew emphasizes things. But never in the Scriptures is something repeated three times, except for this refrain, here and elsewhere.

Holy, holy, holy. Only when referring to God's holiness is there ever a triple repetition, and it communicates this perfection of the attribute. Now, holiness is a complete otherness of something.

[6 : 04] It's being set apart. So it's talking about God being completely set apart from us, completely above and beyond anything that we know, anything that can compare to him. So much so that these burning ones keep calling out, holy, holy, holy, as they cover their face from the glory of God.

And it goes on to say, verse 4, that the foundations and the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And how does Isaiah respond? Isaiah, this righteous man, this prophet, this intellectual, very learned man, this man of artistic and literary genius.

I mean, we can read his book. We can see how smart this man is, how equipped he is, and what's his response?

Now, I would think that his response to this would be to worship. That's what we often say. When you see God, you worship. You fall down in worship, right? But that's not exactly what happens. Isaiah says, 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. He breaks into, not worship, he breaks into repentance. Now, basically, repentance is recentering our lives.

[7 : 24] You may be familiar with the common image that we talk about with repentance, of that of turning around. So going one direction, and then turning around, and beginning to go in another direction. And repentance is saying, you know, this thing has been my center, but it's weak, and it's false.

It's been my core, but it's wrong. And so I change my center, and I turn around. And that's what happens here. Isaiah melts into a puddle. When we read, Woe is me, it's easy for us to kind of get the Eeyore voice in our head.

Oh, woe is me. Oh, that's not what Isaiah's doing. Isaiah's melting in a puddle. The word woe is, as a prophet, he would know the word woe means to cast judgment on something.

The word woe is what you do when you walk into a city that's sinning, and you say, woe to this place, and then you take a big step back, and then God's justice comes down and destroys the city. That's what the word woe means. As a prophet, Isaiah might be used to going and doing this to other people, and yet here in the midst, and in the presence of God's glory, he declares that woe on himself.

[8 : 26] He declares that woe on himself. As he's faced with God's glory and his holiness, Isaiah completely melts. I'm ruined. I guarantee you that when Isaiah walked into the temple that morning, and if you stopped him at the door and said, Isaiah, before you go in, do you have anything to

repent of?

He might have shrugged his shoulders. He might have thought of, well, I wasn't completely honest even this time, but he wouldn't have really said anything. He wouldn't have really said that he had anything to repent of.

And I imagine that's probably how most of us walked in here this morning. But when you see God in all his glory and his holiness, you find your true center.

You're driven to repentance. When you find God, when you see God in all his glory and his holiness, you find your center. Now, Isaiah didn't just repent, though.

He repented of his greatest strength. Think about it. He says, I am a man of unclean lips. Isaiah is a communicator. That's what he does. He's a prophet. He's a speaker. If anything was pure and holy in Isaiah, it was his lips.

[9 : 40] It was his ability to communicate. But at that moment, it isn't even close. Immediately, Isaiah recoils. He sees himself as nothing, not even his lips as anything.

They're unclean. He is broken. He is destroyed. Because when we come face to face with God, everything melts away. We realize who we are. And it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter how pure, how righteous, or how holy you think you are.

When you see God, when you actually see God, when he's a reality, and not just a concept, you will always be driven to repentance. You will always be driven to reaffirm him as your center.

And you'll realize how he hasn't been your center. You'll become aware of your sin. Become aware of your pride, your twisted motivations, your idolatry. If you look through the scriptures, you'll see that over and over again.

When people encounter God, they repent. When people see God, he rearranges their lives so that he's the center again. I want to pause here for a moment.

[10 : 43] We'll get back to this idea, but I want to focus on one thing in Isaiah's confession. That I think often blocks us from this action. Often blocks us from repenting. See, at the beginning of the passage, there is this sort of weird introduction.

I alluded to it before, that this takes place in the year that King Uzziah died. And King Uzziah was one of the best kings, at least when he was young, one of the best kings that Israel, that Jerusalem ever had.

But he spent the last several years of his reign in seclusion because he had leprosy. He was given leprosy because of his pride. And so he had to spend the last few years of his reign as a recluse. And when he died, Jerusalem was going downhill. The culture was plummeting. The kingdom was plummeting. In Isaiah's lifetime, God would bring judgment right up to the gates of Jerusalem. But Isaiah was a cultural elite. He was righteous. He knew that he was going to be part of this solution to make Jerusalem great again. He was going to be part of the group that brought Jerusalem back to its glory.

[11 : 52] We all do this, I think. We all think that we're part of the solution. The problem is everyone else. But I'm part of the solution. The problem is those liberals.

It's the NDP. It's the conservatives. It's the pro-life group. It's the pro-choice group. It's everybody that doesn't think like us, doesn't understand what we understand.

They're the problem. But look what Isaiah says. He says, I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. What's he saying? He's saying, I thought I was part of the solution. I thought I was different. I thought I was better. But now I see that I'm part of the problem. Because compared to the Lord, I'm just as proud. I'm just as sinful. I'm just as wrong as everyone else in my nation.

So woe is me. Now I want us to think about that for a moment. Because probably the number one thing that keeps us from repentance is that instead of looking to God, we look around and compare ourselves to others.

[12 : 56] But we can only focus on the center when we stop comparing ourselves to others. We can only focus on the center when we stop comparing ourselves to others.

In Luke chapter 7, you can turn there if you want, but I'll put the verses that we need to look at on the screen in a little bit. But at the end of Luke 7, Luke tells a story of Jesus being invited to the house of a Pharisee by the name of Simon.

And in the middle of this scene, of this dinner scene in the house of Simon, a woman comes in, a prostitute, and she rushes up to Jesus and she washes his feet with tears and she wipes his feet

with her hair.

And she anoints his feet with perfume. And Simon is appalled. He's disgusted by this. How can this holy man allow this sinful woman to come and to do these things to him?

Surely he must know what kind of woman this is. So Simon's forced to conclude one of two probabilities. Either Jesus is a terrible teacher because he's completely dumb and he doesn't realize who this woman is.

[14:03] Or, the only other possibility, Jesus is just a terrible human being because he realizes who she is and he just doesn't care that this vile woman is doing this to him.

And that's completely inappropriate. Jesus, of course, as he always does these things differently, and he tells Simon this story. Two people owed money to a certain money lender.

One owed him 500 denarii, the other 50. A denarii is about a day's wages for a laborer. So one owed him 500 denarii and the other 50.

Neither of them had the money to pay him back. So he forgave the debts of both. Then he asks this question to Simon. Now which of them will love him more? What's Jesus saying?

Jesus is saying, Simon, you think you're part of the solution because you think that you're better than this woman. But you still have a debt that you cannot hope to pay. She at least realizes the fact that she has a debt.

[15:01] But you refuse to even realize it. So you're acting like a man with money in the bank because you're only looking at her. You're only comparing yourself to her. You realize you don't owe as much as she does.

But that doesn't mean you have money in the bank. You need to look at me, Simon. You have a debt that you can't pay. In fact, because she realizes that she has this debt, she's probably further ahead than you are.

And we all do this. We all can find someone who's more sinful than us. We can find someone who's more at fault than we are. We say, well, I did my best, so I have nothing to repent of.

But that's just not true. The Apostle Paul said, Jesus Christ came to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

The Apostle Paul, you know the guy who wrote roughly half of the New Testament. Of whom sinned. Jesus Christ came to save sinners of whom I am. Present tense. Not whom I was. Of whom I am the worst.

[16:01] Jesus said, it's the sick and the dying who need a physician, not the healthy. So if we refuse to recognize who we are, if we refuse to confess that we are sick, we have no need of Christ.

You know what he has? He has no need of us. When we look around and we compare ourselves to other people, we will not encounter the glory and the holiness of God. We won't cry out like Isaiah did, woe is me, I am undone.

We won't recognize our fundamental brokenness. We won't realize that we are more broken and more sinful and more proud and more twisted than we have ever realized. And we will continue to put ourselves in the center and not give God his rightful spot.

But that's what Isaiah recognized. So he stopped comparing himself to others and when he saw God, he realized that he was part of the problem. And the moment he realized that, what happened?

An angel flies from the altar and rushes out to him. Did you see that? One of the angels, one of the burning ones, remember, flies directly at Isaiah.

[17:03] He takes a coal with tongs. So this coal is so hot that even something called a burning one can't grab it by the hand or the wing, I suppose. He takes a coal with tongs and he flies out to Isaiah.

Now I want you to think about this from Isaiah's perspective. Now the point of view camera and you see this being called a burning one flying at you. You know, the only image that Isaiah has of fire coming from God is judgment.

Every time that the unholy meets the holy and the holy lashes out in fire, it results in the consumption of the unholy. So as the angel speeds out to him, I'm positive that what Isaiah is thinking is, I'm unholy, I'm wretched, I'm undone, I'm dead, I'm a goner.

But that isn't what happens. No, the coal touches Isaiah's lip. The very part of him that he confessed as being unholy, and instead of a pronouncement of judgment, there's a pronouncement of grace.

Why? How is that possible? Well, where's that coal from? The coal's from the altar. It's from the burnt offering. It's from the sacrifice. So what does that mean?

[18:18] It means that Isaiah was right. He was right to say, woe is me. He was right to understand that he should have been consumed. He should have been destroyed.

He should have been consumed, but something else was. Isaiah was right. He should have been destroyed, but something else already was. And here's the proof.

All that's left of the bowl or the lamb or whatever was the burnt offering is that coal. Judgment is already falling. And Isaiah tastes it, but he doesn't absorb it.

When we feel the judgment that we deserve, but it doesn't fall on us, then we begin to be drawn to the center. When we see this grace, it draws us to the one who gives it.

Now, of course, the blood of bulls and goats doesn't take away and cleanse us of sin, but it looks ahead to the only thing that could. It looks ahead to Christ. Jesus was holy, holy, holy.

[19:19] He was the only man who could have stood where Isaiah stood, where we stand, in the presence of God, and survive. But he didn't. He was the only one who could have stood in the full brunt of God's glory and survive, but he didn't survive.

In Gethsemane, what did he say? My soul is sorrowful even unto death. What he's saying, it's the same thing as what Isaiah said, woe is me.

But Jesus didn't have a word of pardon like Isaiah did. He took the brunt of God's wrath. He was the true sacrifice. See, without Jesus, fire is always a symbol of destruction, of consumption, of judgment.

But because Jesus was consumed, it is now a symbol of purification. You see what happened to Isaiah? In the very same moment that he realized that he was more sinful than he ever realized, the same moment he realized the depth of his sinfulness, he's also confronted that he's more loved and he's more accepted than he ever dared for.

And you can't have one without the other. In one moment, Isaiah's whole understanding of himself is completely stripped away and then rebuilt.

[20:43] So think back to Isaiah walking into the temple that morning. I don't know if it was a morning. I just assumed it was because that's when we gathered together. How did he walk into the temple? On what confidence did he walk on the temple?

He walked in on his own. He did it because he met his own standard. He walked in on the credit of his own righteousness and he came face to face with God and suddenly his standards became completely irrelevant.

God blew them out of the water. He realized that he was nothing. But at the same moment he's declared to be something. Not because he met a standard but because that standard was meant for him.

And we can't repent unless we have that same experience. How can we repent? If we build our lives on the confidence in ourselves, we can't admit that we're wrong.

If I built my life on confidence in my own ability to lead or to parent well and how can I look back and say, man, I messed up.

[21:40] I can't. I have to find an excuse. Oh, well, it was the situation. I did the best in a bad situation. Or I was given bad advice or I have to limit to. Well, I wasn't wrong per se.

It was just a small misjudgment. No wonder we don't repent because we build our lives on something. We build our lives on a center that is weak.

And we can't repent of it because that will destroy our center. But if our confidence and our identity is not in ourselves, we can be strong in it and repent.

If our confidence is in ourselves, it's like this time when I was working construction and I was standing on a scaffolding and knocked out the bar that was holding up the scaffolding. Same thing happens to us.

We're going to fall and we have the potential to get hurt. Okay? That's what happens when we repent and our center is ourselves. But if we have that same experience that Isaiah had, if we come face to face with God's glory, if we discover that we actually do deserve death but we've been spared, then how can we not repent?

[22:51] And repent now, daily, present tense, like Paul did. A while ago, my wife and I had a friend, friends of ours, over, and the wife was telling us a story.

The difference of being disciplined by her mom and being disciplined by her dad. She said she used to, when she was little, make it a little game that she played to see how angry she could get her mom.

She's repented of this. But she said she would do things to make her mom angry and her mom would discipline her but it was almost a game. The discipline would hurt. But it wouldn't be enough to actually change her.

If anything, it just made her, when she was a little girl, see if she could get her mom even angrier next time. But with her dad, it was different. You see, her dad would sit her down and talk to her and as she talked, as he talked, she would get more and more upset at how she let her dad down and how she had hurt her dad by her behavior.

And she would beg him to stop talking and to just give her trouble. Just give me a spanking. Don't keep talking to me and showing me how I've hurt you. I'd rather just take the punishment.

[24 : 05] See, with her dad's discipline, she grew to hate her disobedience because of what it did to her dad. Now, this isn't a perfect illustration, but it shows the difference between the law and the gospel, between a legal conviction and an evangelical or a gospel-giving.

driven conviction. In Christ, the hammer doesn't fall on us, but we see what it costs God to have that justice fall on Christ. We see both his holiness and his love and it reshapes our hearts to love him and to hate our sin.

A great illustration of this is back in that story in Luke 7. When Jesus finished that story that he told to Simon, the Pharisee, he asks a question, which of these two debtors would love the money lender more?

And of course, that would be the one who had the bigger debt forgiven. Then Jesus points to the woman and he says this, Do you see this woman? I came into your house and you did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, as her great love has shown.

[25 : 23] But whoever has been forgiven little, loves little. Did you catch that? As her great love has shown. Jesus didn't say, she has loved me well, so I have forgiven her sins.

No, he said, her many sins have been forgiven. And you can tell that because of how much she loves me. That love for God is the only response that we can have.

But we won't have it if we think that we are forgiven a tiny debt. Unless we realize the massive debt that we have, and that it has been forgiven in full, we will not respond in love like we should.

And that brings us to our final point. When we move to the center, we give our lives over in worship. When we move to the center, we give our lives over in worship.

In the New Testament, the word for repentance is metanoia, which comes from two words. But what it literally means is to have a new mind, to get a new mind. So the image, like I said, is physically turning around, but that starts by having a completely new outlook, a new mind.

[26 : 35] It means we begin to see the world completely differently. What that means is that it's completely impossible for repentance to be something that's periphery to us, on the side. It's not repentance as having a new finger, or having, you know, a new toenail.

It's having a new mind to see things completely different. Everything we see changes. And when our center changes, everything else in our life will change. So think back to Isaiah.

We call this Isaiah's commission, but he's already been a prophet for five chapters, if this is in chronological order. But he's already been a prophet.

But this experience completely changes his understanding of his call. It completely changes his life. Up until now, how was he a prophet?

Why was he a prophet? Well, why do we do anything? We do something because it fulfills us. He was a prophet because it fulfilled him. How? Well, he probably, just like when we do something, that he gained satisfaction from a good job, or he thought he could make a difference.

[27 : 39] And you do the same thing when we do something. We have some motivation for doing it. Maybe it's gaining respect or love or acceptance from other people. But then look at the job that Isaiah takes at the end of this commission.

When he says, here am I, send me. And God gives him this commission. Verse 9, 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.

Isaiah is insane. Did you read this job description that he's given? He takes a job with a guarantee from God that he will have absolutely no response to what he's going to do.

He takes a guarantee that he will not have any respect, that he will be hated, that he will be reviled, that people will say that he's lying. Who in the world would take this job? There's absolutely no job satisfaction guaranteed from the beginning.

[28 : 46] Say, Isaiah came to the temple to worship a concept, this concept of God, but as he leaves, he is going to offer his whole life as worship to a God who is a reality.

He doesn't need to build his identity on success or on people respecting him because he's come face to face with the glory of God. And because of that, he knows that he deserves death, he knows that he's unworthy, but he also knows that he's been pardoned by that same God of glory and holiness.

He knows that God loves him and is for him. He knows that he's both more sinful than he ever realized and far more loved and accepted than he ever dared hope.

Friends, if we don't come face to face with God like that, then we'll spend our lives looking for success or respect or love or romance or money or power or position or something to tell us that we are something.

Those things will be our center and we won't be able to repent because it will break the whole weak foundation of our lives. But if we dare, if we come face to face with God, if we realize that these things will never support us, they won't support our families, they won't support our church and we realize that we're nothing, that we're far more sinful than we ever realized, but we'll also taste the judgment that didn't fall on us but fell on Christ instead and we'll realize that we're far more loved and cared for than we ever dared hope and if we do that and only if we do that we'll be able to live our lives in worship and then we'll have the power to lay our lives down, to lay ourselves down, to recognize that that is our center and that no circumstance can change it.

[30 : 43] Not the circumstance here and now, not any circumstance that will come upon you because that is the center. that is strong and that's the only thing that's able to secure both you, me, and this church.

Let's pray.