

ALLIANCE UNIVERSITY

Old Testament Exegetical Commentary of Book of Isaiah

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Old Testament Orientation 651

by

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ISAIAH'S COMMISSION (Chapter 6)

Isaiah received his call to prophetic ministry in 704 B.C, the year in which King Uzziah died. Even though Isaiah knew from the outset that his ministry would prove relatively fruitless and discouraging, he responded enthusiastically to this privilege (Constable, 5). The prophet Isaiah played an important role in God's plan. He foretold the Messiah's coming and brought hope to His people during a challenging time. The promise of hope is not one for the nation of Israel, but also for all of us. Isaiah is the most quoted Old Testament prophet by New Testament writers, and his book is the second most quoted in the New Testament, after Psalms. It is said that Isaiah is the first of the great prophetic books, though he is not the first of the great prophets (Goldingjay, 16). Isaiah's primary audience was the people of Judah. They were failing to live according to the commands of God recorded in the Torah. Due to their disobedience, Isaiah prophesied future judgment on Judah. Isaiah also foretold of God's salvation for the believing remnant of Israel, and for all those who worship Yahweh.

This story in chapter 6 is about the prophet Isaiah's vision of heaven. In this vision, he sees seraphim angels worshipping God. Isaiah becomes aware of his sinfulness in the presence of God, he looks at God, cries out in fear, and an angel comes from heaven to help Isaiah overcome his sense of unworthiness (Hopler, 2018). It should be mentioned that seraphs have six wings, in pairs that serve different purposes. One pair of the seraphim wings were used to cover their faces which shielded them from becoming overwhelmed by directly looking at God's glory. Another pair of the seraphim wings were used to cover their feet, which was a sign to symbolize their humble respect or submission to God. The other pair of wings were to fly around God's throne in heaven, which represented the freedom and joy that comes from worshipping God as they celebrate. Their angelic voices are so powerful that the sound caused shaking and smoke in

the temple where Isaiah was praying when he sees the heavenly vision. The first eight verses speak of Isaiah's cleansing and the last five verses tell of Isaiah's commission.

The call narrative was the expression used in the Bible to indicate the first dialogue between God and his future prophet. The call story provides background to the initial collection of prophecies and introduces the stories about Isaiah's activity and the later collection of prophecies. So, we see that each commissioning story is unique to the situation and the person. The prophecies that God gave him were directed toward Israel, Judah, and other nations. Isaiah knew when God called him, and it was made very clear. The first verse in chapter six tells us exactly, "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord." and history tells us this was 740 BC.

The narrative is organized without a single word wasted. The images and language used in verses 1-4 to begins with a vision of God in which it emphasizes majesty (seated on a throne), transcendence (high and exalted, the train of his robe filled the temple, the temple was filled with smoke), and holiness (holy, holy, holy). Verse 5 follows, in which s up with Isaiah's cry of dereliction, in which he testifies to the terrible self-knowledge that has come because of his vision. Isaiah recognizes that moral corruption separates him from God, and he knows that such corruption cannot coexist with the God that has now been revealed to him. Surprisingly enough, God is not willing for Isaiah to be destroyed. Verses 6-7, then tell us that Isaiah's lips are cauterized and pronounced clean with the blazing coal from the altar. This is the time when God's voice is actually heard asking who will carry the message for him (Oswalt, 125).

Isaiah is now elated in his new-found cleanliness of his lips and makes himself available to go, as we see in verse eight and God responds to him and tells him to go and tell this people. Isaiah is to speak a message that will harden the people's heart and prevent them from being

healed (verses 9-10). Isaiah then asked God how long he will be preaching in this way (verse 11) and God's response is frightening. He informs Isaiah that he is to preach until the whole nation is like a field of burned-out stumps (verse 11). There is a glimpse of hope as we see at the very end of verse 13 when it is said, "the holy seed will be the stump to the land."

Isaiah knew when God had called him, and the "call" was thought to be quite impressive. Isaiah's calling was not as the world counts success, but it was to faithfulness (Oswalt, 128). The call was wrapped in the Aura of the Glory of God, a high view of Deity and it also came during a time of worship, in the atmosphere of adorations and praise. Isaiah's call also included the marks of a theophany – God being present. He was certainly there spiritually, but not physically, the day he called Isaiah to preach. Isaiah's call also involved the humiliation of the potential servant, conviction leading to confession of sin, and a sense of unworthiness. Isaiah's call also led to the cleansing of those sins and his call expects his response and personal obligation. The call also included a commission which is stated in verse nine "And he said, Go, and tell this people..." We see that first Isaiah saw the Lord, next Isaiah saw himself, then Isaiah saw the need and he heard the voice and then he obeyed.

God does not appear to Isaiah in human form. Rather, it's a vision of the divine throne room. Although God is spirit, He sometimes allows people to see a physical representation of Himself. To Isaiah, God is sitting high upon a throne in the temple that Solomon had built. (Pratt, 2). In this vision Isaiah saw the reality of the whole invisible, spiritual world. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up and His train filled the temple. Here we have the revelation of the transcendent greatness of God. He is altogether other than man. The other point of emphasis in the vision is the glory of God. Not only the temple but the whole earth is full of His glory. The vision of the holiness and glory of God is intended to teach us that we can approach Him only

with reverence. In addition, while the Lord interacts with Isaiah during the course of the vision, he asks, “Whom shall I send?” and Isaiah replies, “Send me!”. This isn’t a case where God actually comes to earth to visit and speak with a particular person. Isaiah is in awe, not because he is terrified but because he realizes that he is so unworthy, so ill-equipped and so out of place in this holy and amazing place.

Isaiah is called by God in a very dramatic way. Isaiah's vision in the temple is of the majesty, glory and sovereignty of God, but not of his visage. The throne depicts God's reign over his people, while the temple depicts his presence in the midst of his people. Isaiah is in total amazement when he sees the glory of God. He says: “ I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” (Isaiah 6:1). Isaiah sees that his robe is so large that it fills the entire room. God sometimes allow people to see his physical representation even though He is Spirit.

The train of the robe is the back portion of the robe that hangs down and sweeps across the floor symbolizing majesty and honor. The train was made up of pieces of swatches of the royal robes of defeated kings. The conquering king would have portions of the defeated kings robe cut and sown into his own robe as a symbol and testimony of the conqueror’s strength and power. Isaiah looked at the train on God’s robe and there were so many conquests until his robe “filled the temple” symbolizing He had defeated every enemy.

God’s glorious and majestic robe that filled the temple signifies his absolute authority. This means that God is high exalted and there is no room for anyone else. It also signifies his divine perfections. There is no one else who is all-powerful, all-knowing, unconstrained by the limitations of time and space, and absolutely righteous in all he does. Lastly it signifies his incomparable splendor. Isaiah gave us glimpses of his heavenly visions. He saw a high and

exalted throne encircled by an ethereal rainbow, seraphs crying “Holy, holy, holy,” lamps blazing, lightning flashing, thunder rumbling, angels and saints worshiping. However, God’s authority, perfection, and incomparable splendor are not only on display in heaven, but His glory is on display in creation—all around us.

The train on the robe was a symbol of glory and splendor. All clothing, in those days, had to be constructed “from scratch” – fibers of cotton, linen or wool had to be spun into thread, threads had to be woven into cloth, cloth had to be cut and sewn into garments by hand. It was a time-consuming process. Only rich and powerful could afford to add extra length to their robes. The longer the train, the more glorious and splendid the king. And as he paraded past his subjects, the length of his robe was meant to impress.

Isaiah then enters into God’s presence and sees God surrounded by seraphim. Seraphim is a transliteration of the Hebrew word, probably meaning “burning ones.” This chapter is the only reference in the Bible where seraphim are recognized as angelic beings in scripture (Constable, 62). The seraphim used one pair of wings to cover their faces so that they would not be overwhelmed by directly looking at God’s glory, another pair of wings to cover their feet as a sign of respect and submission to God, and another pair of wings to move around joyfully as they celebrate. Their angelic voices are so powerful that the sound causes shaking and smoke in the temple where Isaiah is praying when he sees the heavenly vision.

When Isaiah heard the seraphs describe the Lord as the absolute Holy One, he knew there was no hope for him. He knew that his character was in no comparison to the Holy One. Isaiah feared that he would be consumed, since he was in the presence of the purest of all beings and he announced woe to himself because he knew he was in trouble (Constable, 63). The angel comes to purify Isaiah’s lips as the atonement of sin. Isaiah’s reaction is “Woe to me! I am ruined! For

I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” Isaiah then realizes that his sinfulness and the sinfulness of the people of Judah have ruined him before God and he can’t do anything for God until he is forgiven (Pratt, 4). Isaiah knows that until he is forgiven he cannot do anything for God. Isaiah did acknowledge his hopeless condition – he did not pleas with God or make vows to God – and god went into action (Constable, 63). God than provides the means for Isaiah to receive the calling. A seraphim, angel of the Lord, with tongs takes a burning hot coal from the altar, flies to Isaiah and takes the embers to Isaiah’s lips to cleanse his sin. Without this cleansing atonement, Isaiah would not have received his commissioning to be a Prophet.

Some may wonder why Isaiah said his lips were clean and not his heart. There was some suggestion that the lips were evident of what was really felt in the heart. One suggests that the things that were actually emerging in Isaiah’s life showed what he might say about his heart which was unclean. James 3:9-12 states “⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” James refers to the tongue in the above scripture as Jesus refers to the tongue in Matthew 15:18 “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” Another suggestion was that another possibility is that after just hearing the golden tones of the seraphs, Isaiah knew that his lips could never be used in such a holy service. He knew this because he used his lips to praise himself, put others down, and to generally serve his own ends.

When Isaiah calls out that he is unclean, sinful, and undone God than provides the means for him to enter His presence and receive the calling to which he is being led. While the physicality of the seraphim touching Isaiah's lips with coal is amazing, it is also a very present symbolic meaning of what just took place. Isaiah is confronted with his lack of holiness in God's presence, Isaiah confesses that he is unclean and sinful, an angel comes to Isaiah with coal to purify his lips and God forgives and atones for Isaiah's sins through his cleansing. In the same sense, the angel does to Isaiah what God does to each one of us. God's holiness reveals our unholiness, we are left without anything hidden on the presence of God, God provides a cleansing or our sins through the death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and God forgives and atones for our sins through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah sees his situation as so hopeless that he doesn't even ask God for cleansing or deliverance. This is where he underestimates the grace of God. God's intention is not to bring the fire to destroy Isaiah's offending lips, nor did he give him the vision to annihilate him. Rather, he has these terrifying things to come into Isaiah's life so that he might be delivered from his true vocation as to having seen the truth of God and of himself and having received the gracious provision of cleansing fire. This is the breakthrough moment when Isaiah receives his forgiveness offered by God. Immediately after the seraph angel purifies Isaiah's lips, God interacts with Isaiah, calling him to deliver messages to people who need to change their lives. Now being freed from his sin, Isaiah enthusiastically accepts whatever assignment God wanted to give him. He now becomes a prophet of God.

The Lord (Master) proceeded to give Isaiah specific instructions about what He wanted him to do and what the prophet could expect regarding his ministry (vv. 9-10), his historic-political situation (vv. 11-12), and his nation's survival (v. 13) (Constable, 65). The Lord sent

Isaiah back to the people whom he lived with – a people of unclean lips. He had to tell them to listen and look at the revelations which he brought from God, but they wouldn't fully understand what the prophet meant. God made it clear to Isaiah that the more he preaches, the less the people will see, hear or understand what he says to them. The effect of Isaiah preaching would be that they harden their hearts against his messages, and they would not repent. It's not the fact that they could not repent however, they did not want to repent. The news that the Israelites would harden their hearts was definitely a disappointment to Isaiah. He asked the Lord how long he would have to preach and how long would the Israelites be unresponsive to him. The Lord did not give Isaiah a time frame however he did tell him that he should continue preaching until the full extent of God's judgement had come on the people. The existence of the stump of the tree cut down would be the evidence that God was not finished with Israel.

The prophet Isaiah played an important role in God's plan; He foretold the Messiah's coming and brought hope to His people during a challenging time. This promise of hope is not only for the nation of Israel, but also for all of us. In the book of Isaiah, we see how God works for the good of His children and is sovereign in the worst of circumstances. Not only that, but He also is a just God, who will give the evildoers in the world their recompense (Isaiah 61:8). Though we are sinful and deserve to be punished, He has provided salvation for us through Jesus Christ, who suffered on our behalf and freed us from our sins. In Him, we have hope for eternity. We can view ourselves as Isaiah in his calling as we need to self-examine ourselves to ensure that there is nothing keeping us from God's call on our lives. We can hinder and block all that God has for us through our sins and excuses. We know that God is all-powerful and all-knowing however, God requires us to atone for our sins before we go out and live the call that we have on our lives.

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