

June 21, 2009

Isaiah: Responding to God's Call

Purpose: To help us realize that when God calls us, God empowers us to complete the tasks to which we are called

Key Bible reference: Isaiah 6, Isaiah 1

Key Verse: Isaiah 6.8

Biblical Interpretation

Isaiah carried out his prophetic ministry from approximately 742 B.C. until 700 B.C. (Some scholars extend the date to 687 B.C. That would be just a century before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem.)

Isaiah's ministry extended through the reigns of four of the kings of Judah: Uzziah [uh-ZIGH-uh], Jotham [JOH-thuhm], Ahaz, and Hezekiah. During this period the kingdom of Israel to the north came under the control of the Assyrian Empire; and its capital city, Samaria, was destroyed in 722/721 B.C.

Many people from Israel were carried away into captivity to the north and east. Some escaped and made their way south to Jerusalem as refugees. Archaeology has shown that Jerusalem expanded rapidly during the reign of Hezekiah. The area to the east of the Central (Tyropoeon) [tigh-ROH-pi-uhn] Valley, now known as Mount Zion, was developed in this period. It is likely that this expansion was due to the influx of a large number of refugees from the north.

Our Bible Lesson comes from the early chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Careful study of the entire book has resulted in the view held by many scholars that Chapters 1-39 relate to Isaiah of Jerusalem. In fact, Chapters 36-37 are largely duplicated in 2 Kings 18:13-20:19. Later chapters in the book seem to reflect different

and later historical settings. They are often related to the experience of Judeans in the Babylonian exile, perhaps a century and a half after the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the powerful influence of the Jerusalem prophet carried over and inspired those who came after him. Those spiritual heirs of Isaiah shared a commitment to prophetic witness that makes the book a unified expression of God's ways with his people. That is why Isaiah 55, for example, breathes the same spirit of divine inspiration as that which guides this study text.

It may seem strange to have a Bible Lesson that begins in the sixth chapter of a book and then goes back to the first chapter! But upon consideration, it makes sense that for this lesson the message of Isaiah should follow after his call.

The general thrust of Isaiah's prophetic vision is provided in Chapter 1-5. This is like a brief overview of the larger work that follows. His first vision then, recorded in Chapter 6, introduces us to the more detailed prophetic work in the rest of the book. Our Bible Lesson begins with the account of that first vision.

Isaiah 6:1-4. We know from the historical note at the beginning of the Book of Isaiah that the prophet's ministry overlapped with the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah. The first verse in our text makes clear that the overlap was less than a year

in length. Isaiah's call occurred during the last year of Uzziah's reign. This was very likely 742 B.C.

What did Isaiah "see"? Scripture informs us that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). In the words of Jesus, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). We must understand, then, that what Isaiah saw was a vision. This is similar in type to the vision of John described in the Book of Revelation.

How does Isaiah describe what he saw in his vision? He describes the Lord in terms meaningful to Isaiah's own culture and times. The Lord is enthroned in heaven like an earthly king is enthroned in his throne room. Reliefs from the ancient Near East depict kings and gods sitting on thrones elevated above their servants and court officials. And just as kings wore royal robes, the Lord wears a robe that reaches from his throne in heaven to the earth. Isaiah 66:1 expresses the prophetic understanding that "heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool."

Because of the sacredness of the Jerusalem temple, the footstool of the Lord, so to speak, is that temple. Isaiah envisions a God so great that just the hem of his robe filled the Temple. Imagine the magnificent sweep of the robe reaching upward to the King of kings and Lord of lords in heaven above!

In his vision, Isaiah saw seraphs around God's heavenly throne, just as human kings had servants hovering around to respond to their every beck and call. The word seraph is not an English translation of a Hebrew word. It is the Hebrew word adopted into English. Apparently, the early translators of the Bible into English could find no word in our language that was the equivalent. Seraph in Hebrew means "a fiery

being." These are the creatures of inspired imagination. They may have looked something like the mythological griffins. Possibly, they express the truth that God, in all his glory, is beyond human imagination.

The "pairs of wings covering the faces" suggests that God is too holy to be looked on even by his heavenly creatures. The pairs covering the feet may mean that even the pure creatures of heaven are unworthy to be seen by the one they serve. This modesty on the part of the seraphs makes even more striking the refrain they echoed back and forth. The expression of "holy" three times is for emphasis in Hebrew, and it functions that way in English as well. Not only is heaven full of God's glory, the whole earth is as well. The glory of God is not restricted to Jerusalem or to the Holy Land alone; it reaches the whole of his creation. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1).

So filled with vibrant power was the presence of the Lord that the doors of the Temple shook in their pivots. The effect must have been something like what happens to the dishes on a shelf in a house built next to the train tracks when a locomotive passes by. And the "house," that is the Temple, was filled with smoke. Like Moses at Mount Sinai, fire and smoke accompanied the presence of Almighty God, at one and the same time both revealing the power of God and obscuring his presence.

What an awesome sight confronted Isaiah! Only as we begin to sense what he experienced can we appreciate what follows.

Isaiah 6:5-8. Compared to many of his fellow Israelites, Isaiah must have been an exceptionally spiritual and moral person.

Otherwise, God would not have chosen him to be God's prophet. Yet, in the face of this vision, which revealed the glory of God, all Isaiah's righteousness seemed to him as tattered rags. A spontaneous cry of despair broke from his lips. He was lost! He recognized himself as an abject sinner. The lips of the heavenly seraphs could praise God. Isaiah's lips could not; he knew that his lips were unclean and unworthy, just like those of the people among whom he lived. Yet Isaiah's eyes had seen—had had a vision of—the ruler of the universe, God who owned and directed the hosts of heaven.

Isaiah recognized his sinfulness as he stood in the presence of the sinless one. Recognition of one's errors followed by confession precede spiritual cleansing. The cleansing is symbolic of the purpose of the sacrificial altar. The daily sacrifices were a constant reminder of ongoing human error and sin before and against God and people. The coal taken from the altar of burnt offering cleansed the lips and person of the prophet. He was then declared free of sin and guilt by the Lord's servant, the seraph.

Now Isaiah was prepared for the service to which God would call him. No longer did he hear the word of God's servant. Rather, the Lord God's self spoke to the heavenly court and asked, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8). The word us is a reminder that those who are God's servants share intimately in God's will.

When God called, Isaiah responded. He was available. He would go. Little did he know where he would go or what he would be called upon to do. It was enough that the Lord needed something done. Isaiah volunteered to do whatever it was. As it was said of Paul, so it could have been said of Isaiah, "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake

of my name" (Acts 9:16). It began with God's command, "Go and say to this people" (Isaiah 6:9).

Isaiah 1:14-17. What was Isaiah's message? Verses 14-15 indicate that the entire society was corrupt. To be sure the people were very religious; but theirs was a perverted religion. They were very careful to keep the religious seasons and festivals right on time. But the Lord hated the sham of empty rituals, made meaningless by the sin that pervaded the society. The Lord was just about fed up with the religious practices of the people!

The people did pray, but God had to gaze away from them at such times. Indeed, God had to turn away often; for the people of Judah liked to make many prayers. Why would God not listen? Because the hands of these religious folks were "full of blood (1:15).

This is not a common expression in English. In Hebrew it refers to murderous activity. The shedding of blood is the ultimate expression of the selfish evil person. Love for the Lord God can not exist when concern for people is absent in the heart of a person, no matter how many religious rituals he or she observes.

In verses 16-17, Isaiah's prophetic character is revealed. He not only confronted his people with their sin, he called for true repentance. Note that he, speaking for the Lord, commanded them to do some things and to stop doing other things.

The people were to make the effort to cleanse themselves. Moral and spiritual change involves both divine and human initiative. God only does so much. Each individual must take responsibility, respond to God's call to repentance, and do what is necessary to

cleanse his or her life of evil thoughts and deeds. Isaiah emphasized that ceasing to do evil is not enough. Notice the positive imperatives:

- Learn to do good!
- Seek justice (for those subject to injustice)!
- Rescue (save) the oppressed (from the cause of their oppression)!
- Defend the orphan!
- Plead for the widow!

These latter two groups (orphans and widows) are the weakest and most vulnerable in society. What God (through Isaiah) called for was a complete reversal of the prevailing moral and ethical behavior among God's people. Rather than bringing harm to others, they were to come to their assistance. This is a timeless message every generation must hear and heed. We hear it today because when God called Isaiah, God empowered him to complete the tasks to which he was called. Will we heed the message?