

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 40

ISAIAH – Part Two

I. BACKGROUND

Who was Isaiah?

Isaiah was a Jewish Prophet who prophesied during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah. He is identified as “Isaiah Ben Amoz,” which means Isaiah son of Amoz.

The time period of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry stretched from 740 B.C. (the year King Uzziah died–Isaiah 6:1) through at least 681 B.C. (Isaiah 37:38 reference). This prophetic ministry was active during certain key events in the reign of Hezekiah (*see* 2 Kings 18:13 – 20:19). This was the time of Judah’s Assyrian crisis.

Assyria was the world power from the northeast that was seeking to exercise dominion over Israel, Judah and others. In the 730’s, Israel and Aram tried to persuade Judah to join in a fight to stop the Assyrian expansion. Judah’s king at the time was Ahaz. Rather than joining against Assyria, Ahaz made the decision to ask for Assyrian help against Israel and Aram. Assyria then came in and conquered Israel around 722/721 B.C.

Some 20 years later, Judah’s king, Hezekiah, decided to stop paying tribute to the Assyrian king (now Sennacherib). Sennacherib then came and destroyed much of the Judean countryside and laid siege to Jerusalem for two years. As Hezekiah sweated out the situation, it was Isaiah that brought the prophesy of God’s promised deliverance. A journey back into the lessons from Kings in this class will refresh much of these details.

Did Isaiah write the book “Isaiah?”

The book Isaiah clearly delivers the prophesies of the prophet Isaiah, regardless of who actually recorded them. Since the early 1800’s, many modern scholars have cast doubt on whether one individual compiled the entire book of Isaiah. Many scholars believe that a second individual (or even a third) actually wrote chapters 41–66. Often, these scholars espouse their positions with a certain arrogance as to any who might disagree. These scholars consider any that hold to a unified Isaiah (*i.e.*, all 66 chapters being actual words of the prophet) to be biblical light-weights of a naïve or ignorant perspective.

Arrogance aside, there are in fact very good arguments for a unified Isaiah. The arguments include literary usage, repeated phrases and themes found throughout the book, the records of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other evidence. Those wishing to pursue these arguments further are invited to read R. K. Harrison's Introduction to the Old Testament.

II. THE CALL OF THE PROPHET (Isaiah 6)

The sixth chapter of Isaiah discloses a compelling vision of God, while setting forth the commission of Isaiah as a prophet. The vision, itself, becomes a central theme for later Biblical writings. The actions detailed within the vision provide a solid glimpse into key biblical doctrines of God's holiness, man's sinfulness, and the interaction of the two. Also, this vision highlights the effect a clear vision of God can have on a man.

A. *The Vision.*

Isaiah notes that in the "year that King Uzziah died" (which would be 740 B.C.), Isaiah "saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple" (6:1). This vision was of Yahweh as King. The throne on which He sat was "high and exalted" or set apart from all else. This is the essence of the word "holy" that is used subsequently [Hebrew *kadosh*—"holy"]. "Holy" as a word finds its root in the meaning of "set apart."¹ That which is holy is higher and distinguished from that which is profane. Here in Isaiah's vision, God as Holy is set apart high above all else, in recognition that nothing exceeds God's holiness. Before God, all else is profane.

The vision begins with the Lord, but goes further. Isaiah then sees:

Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two wings they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory. At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. (6:2-4)

¹ *Kadosh* can be used for a man who is "holy" in the sense that the man separates himself from the rest of the people to devote himself to God (Is. 65:5). It also references items which were set apart for use exclusively in connection with God. Pronounced a bit differently (*kodosh*) the word is used twice to denote the Holy of Holies, that place most set apart from all others in the Temple.

Isaiah's throne-room experience includes seeing these seraphim. Seraphim are not mentioned by name anywhere else in the Bible. "Seraphim" is one of a number of words used by Isaiah that are not found elsewhere in the bible.

The Seraphim portion of the vision shows flying or hovering creatures who are awesome in their own respect; yet, these creatures lives and actions center around God himself. These creatures cover their faces and feet, unable to gaze upon God in his glory and unable to stand in his presence. As the creatures fly, they are calling out to each other that Yahweh is "holy" (repeated three times for emphasis); Yahweh is "Almighty" which is well translated by others as "Lord of Hosts;"² and that the "whole earth is full of his glory." In other words, while the vision of God's glory sources from God himself, the glory does not stop there. God's glory descends down into earth itself. "Glory" [Hebrew *cabod*] references the splendor/ majesty/wealth of God. God's majesty is shown in his creation. Earth is seen as part of God's vast treasury.

These creatures doing the chanting were by no means unimpressive in their own right. Their calling to one another was so imposing that the door posts and foundations were shaking and the room was filled with smoke.

B. Isaiah's Reaction.

As Isaiah glimpses God in his holiness with the hosts of heaven clearly proclaiming his praises, the purity and uniquely awesome nature of God has a very understandable reaction within Isaiah.

"Woe is me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." (6:5)

Following Isaiah's experience, he first sees God in his greatness, power, and purity. Next, he sees the hosts of heaven, awesome creatures in their own right, giving all glory honor and praise to God. Then, Isaiah becomes aware of himself. As long as Isaiah had focused only on himself in life, there was nothing noteworthy worth writing about. However, once Isaiah saw the one seated on the throne, Isaiah became

² The word translated "Almighty" is *tz'ba-ot* which is based in the Hebrew *tzaba* referencing an army or host of people. The word is also used in reference to the creatures of heaven and in reference to the sun, moon, and stars (the elements of the heavens).

aware of how unlike God he was. Isaiah was not holy, but was profane. Isaiah was not one set apart, but was one of many profane people. Isaiah and his people were not rooted in purity, but in uncleanness. It causes Isaiah to wail.

Many people live their lives never seeking or getting a glimpse of God in his glory. These are the folks who can start felling self-important. Frequently, these people rewrite the astronomy textbooks and place themselves at the center of the universe! These people are actually out of touch with reality. Reality is the vision that Isaiah has recounted for us. Reality has all of us as unclean. Reality has any good in us as a reflection of God's glory, not our own. Reality is God as Lord of hosts, and us as in need of a touch from his hand.

That touch is given next in the vision of Isaiah:

*Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."
(6:6-7)*

What happens here is both interesting and profound. We see God's solution for Isaiah's true moral guilt. God does not alleviate the guilt through verbally passing over it. In other words, God does not merely say "Awww, don't worry about it..." The guilt Isaiah feels is real. It is true guilt stemming from a life lived unworthily. Hence we may call it true moral guilt.³

The real guilt is in need of a real solution. The solution is found from an encounter with a coal from the altar. The altar was the place of sacrifice and atonement. On the altar, the blood of innocence was poured in the stead of the guilty. By taking a coal from that altar, the sacrificial penalty is touched and imparted to Isaiah. The sacrifice that was made upon the altar is not disclosed to Isaiah. The sacrifice, however, was indeed substantial, for it was a sacrifice empowered to truly remove Isaiah's guilt. It was a sacrifice sufficient to remove sin.

³ This type of guilt should be distinguished from the guilt people often feel that follows forgiveness. Once forgiven, the basis for guilt is gone. Any remaining sense of shame actually is a detraction at that point, not a true reflection of moral guilt.

With the sins of Isaiah atoned for, we bring the scene to a close with God calling out for someone to assist him “Whom shall I send?” (6:8). Isaiah quickly responds with “Here am I. Send me!” Having been forgiven, Isaiah not only finds his voice, but his purpose and service before God.” And Isaiah is sent.

The next several chapters recount Isaiah receiving prophetic instruction from God in several messages to give to the people. Over the next several chapters, the people will be given prophetic glimpses into the actions God will take on behalf of his people. These prophecies include the promise in Isaiah 7:14 that “the LORD himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with a child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (two words in the Hebrew: *imanu* and *el* meaning “with us” and “god”).

Several chapters later in Isaiah 9 we find the prophetic word that serves as the basis for Handel’s Messiah when the prophet is told “in the future” God “will honor Galilee” (9:1). Chapter 9 goes on to say:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (9:6-7)

In those verses, we get a glimpse of how God will bring about a sacrifice of worth that truly can be said to be upholding a throne of justice and righteousness.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

- A. God is real.
- B. God reigns in majesty and truth.
- C. We should behold him.
- D. Even a brief vision of God can change a lifetime.
- E. Let God touch us with his atonement.
- F. Let us never be the same.