

Isaiah's chapter 6

The book of Isaiah places Isaiah's life and ministry between the years 740-681 BC. This places him pre-exile and a key voice to the nation, to the kingdom of Judah, warning them about the imminent judgement of God.

The record of Isaiah's prophetic ministry is found against a background of a number of kings and their kingdoms.

"In the twenty-seventh year of Jeroboam, king of Israel, Azariah the son of Amaziah, king of Judah, became king. He was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-two in Jerusalem.....and he did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah had done, except that the high places were not removed; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places". *2 Kings 15:1-4*. (Amaziah and Uzziah are the same person.)

Much more detail concerning Uzziah can be found in *2 Chronicles 26:1-23*.

The record in the book of Kings is a simple genealogy, a historical account, whereas Chronicles is a priestly account of the same life. This documents both his achievements and his failures during his reign of fifty-two years in Jerusalem.

We read that he sought God in the days of Zechariah, so he had visions; *2 Chron 26:5*, "*and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper*".

He was a military man, winning many battles, against many cities; "*his fame spread as far as the entrance of Egypt, for he became exceeding strong*."

He built towers, buttresses of the wall; he dug many wells; he had farmers and vine dressers; he loved the soil; he had his own army of fighting men; he provided his men with full body armour and invented new weapons with which his men could fight.

"So, his fame spread far and wide, for he was marvellously helped till he became strong. But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the Lord his God by entering the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense."

There is an echo in the Kings account which reads like this, "*he did what was right in the sight of the Lord...according to all that his father had done, except that the high places were not removed...*"

The scripture says, "*he was marvellously helped till he became strong... He did what was right except...*"

Uzziah succumbed to pride, power, position.

The Lord struck the king, so that he was a leper until the day of his death; so, he dwelt in an isolated house. 2 Kings 15:5.

The account continues, and is enlarged, in the record of Chronicles 26.

There we can read that the priest Azariah went into the temple along with eight other valiant men to confront the king, but he would not hear their calls, *"They withstood King Uzziah, and said to him, 'It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honour from the Lord God'". Then Uzziah became furious; and he had a censor in his hand to burn incense. And while he was angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, before the priests in the house of the Lord, beside the incense altar. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and there, on his forehead, he was leprous; so, they thrust him out of that place. Indeed, he also hurried to get out, because the Lord had struck him. King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death. He dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the Lord."*

Pride destroyed him.

The higher profile a person has the greater their potential fall, and the more public their sin and failure. The New Testament gives us examples and warnings: *"Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall."* 1 Corinthians 10:11,12.

The apostle Paul was so aware of the danger of pride, especially considering his position among the other apostles and churches, that he was willing to accept "a thorn in the flesh". to keep him humble: *"And lest I should be exalted by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure."* 2 Corinthians 12:7.

He said: *"Most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me, and therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* 12:9-10.

I have had much admiration for the late Dr Billy Graham and his organisation, who for decades have lived in the spotlight of fame and position, but who have never had any hint of scandal associated with their ministry. They have been a beacon of humility, light, and mutual respect during their long years of ministry.

The apostle James brings simple instructions for believers with words like these, *"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble"* James 4:6. And, *humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."* Verse 10.

It is important for us to recognise that humility is not a characteristic obtained easily or quickly. The virtue is a fruit requiring discipline, and taking initiative on our part. We must humble ourselves. There is no passivity here. Believers are to be actively engaged in all that the Spirit of God wants to reproduce in us.

Let's return to the story of Uzziah and Isaiah himself.

2 Kings 15:5 tells us that as long as Uzziah remained in an isolated house, Jotham the king's son, was in the royal house judging the people.

So, the back story about Uzziah is of a long period of military success, prosperity, stability but also of unrighteousness, idolatry, and gross sin resulting in impending judgment. Even the best of men are sinners with feet of clay.

The first five chapters of Isaiah's prophecy is a catalogue of these matters, but also He mixes these with prophetic promises, such as: *"The whole head is sick and the whole heart faints....There is no soundness in it, but wounds and, bruises and putrefying sores....wash yourselves and make yourselves clean;*

Come now, and let us reason together says the Lord, though your sins be like scarlet they shall be as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool....how the faithful city has become a harlot...

For the day of the Lord of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty and it shall be brought low...Come let us go up to the top of the mountain to the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways and we shall walk in his paths....

Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord and the glory of His majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, the naughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day...

In that day the Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped..." The first chapters of Isaiah 1-5.

Chapter 5 is the description of the Lord's vineyard, how He came upon her and cared for her. Tragically He comes upon her with her walls broken down, her hedges burned, and no rain fallen.

Such a state is described like this: *Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. 4:20.*

The Scriptures reveal a catalogue of sin and failure, unrighteousness and idolatry, pride and unfruitfulness. It includes the death of Uzziah, their icon and leader.

And yet remarkably God's patience and steadfast love continues.

Isaiah 6:1 begins as follows: *In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord.*

Isaiah saw the Lord. His eyes were not fixed on the national crises surrounding him. He was seeing different things. One translation adds an additional word so that the text could be read "Isaiah saw *also* the Lord". Whether this is truly accurate I am not qualified to confirm either way. However, the impact of the additional word being added gives us a clear sense of truth.

Isaiah could not have been blind to the many things happening around him and yet he did not allow them to blur his vision or blind his eyes. Above everything he saw the Lord.

This was an encounter that changed Isaiah's whole life and ministry from then on. It was unsought and totally unexpected. It is not insignificant that the great power of Rome would arise shortly after these events.

John makes it clear that the vision that Isaiah had was in fact Christ Himself because he records it in his gospel; *"These things Isaiah saw when he saw His glory and spoke of Him. John 12:41"*.

A later section of the same text in John is lifted out of the same remarkable story.

Isaiah saw the Lord seated, and seated on a throne. He was high and lifted up. His rightful position is one of supreme authority with no challenger. Christ is the sovereign ruler of the universe with no rival or no equal. What a contrast there is here between Uzziah's temporary and troubled reign and Christ's everlasting, permanent and powerful one!

His train filled the temple. His train means the edges of His robe. His whole being would have been on fire with light. *Psalm 104:1-4 reads like this: "O Lord my God, You are very great: You are clothed with honour and majesty, Who cover Yourself with light as with a garment, Who stretch out the heavens like a curtain. He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters. Who makes the clouds His chariot, Who walks on the wings of the wind, Who makes His angels spirits His ministers a flame of fire."*

The seraphim stood *above*, not in a superior position, but in attendance. They are the fiery guardians of God's holiness. They constantly moved to and fro, covering in pairs their faces and feet, while flying. The temple was full as the seraphim moved and flew, uttering the praises of God. This is the only reference in the Bible to this order of angelic being but the cherubim are mentioned more often.

All the seraphim exclaimed and cried out *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts*". They breathed the atmosphere of heaven. They felt the presence of the thrice holy Almighty God. They continued to exclaim *"the whole earth is full of His glory!"*.

In spite of all that has been happening on earth, as before, from God's perspective the earth is full of His glory. He is unshakeable, unchanging and for ever He reigns!

In response to these angelic beings articulating the glory of God *"the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke."*

His glory stands for His character and actions and is to receive world-wide recognition and acknowledgement; *"Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"*. *Philippians 2:9-11*.

The house was filled with smoke, no doubt arising from the altar of incense, and therefore connected with the fire on the brazen altar. It indicated Isaiah's acceptance before the Lord as indicated in the verses to follow.

The effect upon Isaiah was to bring him down in awe, and with a great sense of his own unworthiness and impurity.

Every time God reveals Himself to man the sight is overwhelming and life changing. We can think of Moses, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Ezra and Nehemiah at the inauguration of the temple, Daniel, Paul on the Damascus Road, John on Patmos and so on.

So should it be with us. The more we apprehend the facts and character of the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the glories of His Person the more deeply we realise our own sinfulness. The nearer we are to the Lord the greater sense of our utter unworthiness. In this revelation of His glory and our sinfulness we learn to identify with the condition of our fellow members of the body of Christ.

"Woe is me, for I am undone! Because 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." Vs. 5

"I am undone" suggests a sense of coming apart, unravelling, of being cut off. Uzziah had been cut off too, both men had a similar experience although both were coming from different backgrounds and responsibilities.

"I am undone! For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts".

Then one of the seraphim flew to Him with a live coal which he had taken from the altar to touch his lips and to purge his sin. The hot fiery coal was placed on Isaiah's mouth and he was pronounced clean, his sin had been taken away. God always applies the great remedy for sin at the place where we most need it.

Sin has many manifestations and differs in its expression. Isaiah was acutely aware of his mouth being unclean, as a prophet of the Lord, and it was there that the purifying fire applied by the seraphim needed to do its work.

Once his sin had been purged Isaiah was in a different place with God, and was able to both hear him, and respond in obedience to Him. What he heard was the intimate speaking of the tri-unity of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He heard the voice of the Lord, Adonai, the supreme Ruler and Judge, and responded, saying, *"Here am I, send me!"*.

Isaiah had been prepared for the commission that the Lord had for him.

The call of God upon Isaiah lay at the foundation of all that the Lord was going to use him for as recorded in the rest of his prophecy.

Verse 9-10 "Go and tell 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 shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed."

This prophetic word of impending judgement was not only for Isaiah's time but it pointed on to the time of Christ Himself who used the same words *e.g. Matthew 13:14, 15*. In fact they are recorded in each of the gospels and in the book of Acts also.

The last few verses of chapter 6 in Isaiah are an answer to his question, "Lord, how long?" The prophetic promise was of a remnant, a tenth, a stump that remained in the ground after the tree had been cut down. The mercy of God is a wonderful response to the impending judgement, leaving men time and space to repent and be part of the faithful remnant that stays true to the Lord at all costs.

"Eternal Light! Eternal Light!
How pure the soul must be.
When, placed within Thy searching sight,
It shrinks not, but, with calm delight
Can live, and look on Thee!

The spirits that surround Thy throne
May bear the burning bliss;
But that is surely theirs alone,
Since they have never, never known
A fallen world like this.

Oh, how shall I, whose native sphere
Is dark, whose eyes are dim,
Before the ineffable appear,
And on my native spirit bear
The uncreated beam?

There is a way for man to rise
To that sublime abode:
An offering and a sacrifice,
A Holy Spirit's energies,
An advocate with God,

These, these prepare us for the sight
Of Holiness above:
The sons of ignorance and night
May dwell in the eternal light,
Through the eternal Love!"

Let us now look at this remarkable man's prophetic ministry a little closer.

Not only is it the longest of the prophetic books, it is the most quoted in the New Testament. It is divided into two parts, the first part being from chapters 1- 39 and the second 40 – 66. It is interestingly a pattern of the way in which the New Testament is also structured.

I am not going to develop all the ways in which the book is structured but rather keep to its main themes, especially those related to holiness.

The Holy One of Israel.

This phrase is distinctive to the book of Isaiah, with it being recorded on only two other occasions, each in Jeremiah.

There is a reference to the phrase in every section of the prophecy. Within the first part of the first section there is a strong denunciation of the sins of the nation. These are directed at the countries surrounding Israel as well as to Israel itself.

Isaiah 1:4 "Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backwards."

Isaiah 5:19 "Let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come that we may know it."

Isaiah 5:24,25 " ...because they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the anger of the Lord is aroused against His people...."

Isaiah 8:13 "The Lord of Hosts, Him you shall hallow".

Isaiah 10:17 "So the Light of Israel will be for a fire and His Holy One for a flame."

Isaiah 10:20 "And it shall come to pass in that day that the remnant of Israel and such as have escaped of the house of Jacob, will never again depend on him who defeated them, but will depend on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel in truth."

Isaiah 12:6 "Cry out and shout, O, inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel in your midst."

Isaiah 17:7 "In that day a man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will have respect for the Holy One of Israel".

Isaiah 37:23 "Whom have you reproached and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice, and lifted up your eyes on high? Against the Holy One of Israel".

Isaiah 47:4 "As for your Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel".

Isaiah 57:15 "For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy".

Isaiah 60:9,14 "Surely the coastlands shall wait for Me, and the ships of Tarshish will come first, to bring your sons from afar; their silver and their gold with them, to the name of the

Lord your God, and to the Holy One of Israel because He has glorified you”the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.”

This name, or title, is a truly significant observation concerning the character and very being of God Himself. Holiness is one of His great attributes. He is God of all the earth. As we were reminded in the record of Isaiah's vision, the whole earth is filled with His glory.

He is Sovereign of the universe, the Creator of all things, the Unchanging One, God of love, Omnipotent One, Omniscient One, Omnipresent One and God of righteousness and Holiness.

Holiness is purity and freedom from all sin and imperfection.

The Holy City

The concept of holiness in the book is applied not only to an earthly city called Jerusalem or Zion, but also to a spiritual or heavenly one. God wants His kingdom to have an earthly basis, but one that shares in His own nature of holiness.

Examples of this are:

Isaiah 1:26 “I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”

Isaiah 2:3 “Many people shall come and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem”.

Isaiah 4:3 “And it shall come to pass that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy – everyone who is recorded among the living in Jerusalem”.

Isaiah 25:6 “And in this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees”.

Isaiah 52:8 “Your watchmen will lift up their voices, with their voices they shall sing together; for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord brings back Zion.”

Isaiah 54:11 “O you afflicted one, tossed with tempest and not comforted, Behold, I will lay your stones with colourful gems, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of crystal, and all your walls with precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children. In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you. Indeed, they shall surely assemble, but not because of Me. Whoever assembles against you shall fall for your sake”.

All of Isaiah 60.

The second part of Isaiah contains a group of "Servant Songs", the most famous of which is 52:13-53:12, which became central to early Christian formulations of who Jesus Christ was and how His death had been redemptive.

- 1 *Song* 41:1-29: Israel will be released by the Lord.
- 2 *Song* 42:1-25: The servant and the Lord's righteousness.
- 3 *Song* 43:1-44:23: Promise of deliverance and blessing.
- 4 *Song* 49:1-26: The Lord's servant will be a light to the world.
- 5 *Song* 50:1-11: The obedience of the servant even in suffering.
- 6 *Song* 52:13-53:12: The suffering of the servant.

The Songs are progressive and prophetic in nature. In the first part of the prophecy, they are related to the promised chosen leader or king, "Messiah", "the anointed one". 9:1-7, 11. In the second part they are replaced by this figure of the servant. At first, the servant appears as the whole nation, (41:8-9, 43:1-13), but then becomes an individual (42:1) whose mission is to bring justice and understanding, "release from the dungeon". In 49:5-6 and 50:10 he appears to be the prophet himself, as representative of the nation, with a mission of being "a light for the Gentiles".

However, in the last servant song, 52:13-53:12, he is portrayed as an individual who can bring actual salvation "for the transgression of my people". His suffering leads to an actual death, which becomes a substitute death, allowing comparison with animal sacrifices laid down in the Mosaic rituals of guilt offering (3:10). The notion of justification is introduced which became so important for Paul in the New Testament, as he sees Christ as the embodiment of the suffering servant.

What a wonderful and inspiring note to finish on as we trace Isaiah's prophetic ministry and depiction of the coming Messiah.

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Sources: The Open Bible, Moorlands the all- in-one Bible guide.