

## Isaiah 6:1 - 13

<sup>6:1</sup> In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. <sup>2</sup> Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' <sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. <sup>5</sup> Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. <sup>7</sup> He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.' <sup>8</sup> Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' <sup>9</sup> He said, 'Go, and tell this people:

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive;  
keep on looking, but do not understand.'

<sup>10</sup> Render the hearts of this people insensitive,  
their ears dull,  
and their eyes dim,  
otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.'

<sup>11</sup>Then I said, 'Lord, how long?' And He answered, 'Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate, <sup>12</sup> the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. <sup>13</sup> Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.'

### Historical and Cultural Background

- *Isaiah*: A poetic preacher who lived in the 700's BC and died after 687 BC, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (after the nation Israel split into two kingdoms). Isaiah lived and taught during four kings' reigns, so he saw some spiritual ups and downs, both of kings and people!
- *King Uzziah*: Uzziah reigned for 52 years (783 – 742 BC) after a string of ungodly kings. He was godly most of the time, and led Israel into military and economic strength. But he made some critical mistakes, out of his pride (2 King 15:1 – 5; 2 Chronicles 26:16 – 23). He became unclean with leprosy as a result. Isaiah seems to have taken his spiritual decline as a sign of more to come.
- *Purification*: Isaiah's vision uses the imagery of fire consistently with how God used it before
  - *The Flaming Sword Between the Angels*: After Adam and Eve corrupted human nature, God prevented them from eating from the tree of life and making their sinfulness immortal. 'He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword' to guard the way back to Eden (Gen.3:24), signifying that God wants to burn/cut away something from within us before Eden.
  - *Fiery Deliverance*: When people kept resisting God, fire become a sign of destruction. God rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah because they were hostile to the family of faith, as shown by their use of rape as a tool of conquest (Gen.19:23 – 28; Dt.29:23). God appeared as a pillar of fire when He led Israel out of Egypt (Ex.14:24 quoted in Isa.4:5).
  - *The Burning Bush and Burning Mountain*: God appeared as a fire in the burning bush as a sign to Moses that God wanted to dwell among His people (Ex.3:2). On Mount Sinai, God called Israel up through divine fire to meet with Him face to face (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:4 – 5). Israel refused out of fear. Moses, however, did go up, and his face shone with light because God purified Moses in some sense (Ex.34:29 – 35).
  - *Fiery Pillar Between the Angels*: In the temple in Jerusalem was gateway back to Eden. In the holy of holies, God appeared as a pillar of light and fire, and stood at the threshold of heaven and earth, between the cherubim (Exodus 25:18 – 22).
  - *Refining Fire*: Moses warned Israel that God will refine them in exile like a refining fire (Dt.32:22) before He returns them to the garden land (Dt.32:40 – 43).

## Questions

1. Think of a movie like Mission Impossible, or The Hobbit, where people have a near-impossible mission. What strikes you about the challenge of taking up a mission like that?
2. Why would God give Isaiah a mission when King Uzziah died? What kind of king was Uzziah?
  - a. Strong and godly at first. But he became proud. He actually tried to play the role of a priest in the temple, and burn incense at the altar. That's why God gave him leprosy.
  - b. (optional, longer version) Uzziah's kingdom prospered in two ways: militarily and economically. Militarily, Uzziah built an elite army with the latest in warfare technology including effective siege engines. They were strong and very fast. Chronicles tells us, 'Moreover, Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, body armor, bows and sling stones. And in Jerusalem he made engines of war invented by skillful men to be on the towers and on the corners, for the purpose of shooting arrows and great stones' (2 Chr.26:14 – 15). As if that weren't enough, whenever Uzziah fought, Scripture says, 'God helped him.'
    - i. To the west, he conquered the Philistine cities, broke down their chief defenses and built up his own cities in the conquered areas.
    - ii. To the east, he conquered Ammon; they paid him tribute.
    - iii. To the south, he conquered the Edomites. His greatest achievement, though, was rebuilding the city of Elath.
    - iv. And with military expansion came economic prosperity. In the Negev, he built forts to secure the water supply. He brought Arabian trade by the sea coast, secured the mineral wealth of the Rift Valley, and developed agriculture in the Judean hills. Jerusalem was heavily fortified and enjoyed a great period of peace. The author of Chronicles says of King Uzziah, 'Hence his fame spread afar, for he was marvelously helped...until he was strong' (2 Chr.26:15).
  - c. With pride, Uzziah overstepped the boundaries of his office:

'But when he became strong, his heart was so lifted up that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the Lord his God, for he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense' (2 Chr 26:16).

Only the priests were allowed to do that. But Uzziah thought he could enter into the presence of God and take God's holy fire unto himself. He was confronted by the high priest, Azariah, and eighty others for stepping out of line and dishonoring the Lord. But here is what happened next:

'Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead...And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the Lord' (2 Chr.26:19 – 21).

He became unclean and had to live in solitary confinement, dependent on the priests for food, help, and company. Leprosy was the only legacy left by the great King Uzziah. He had dared to presume on God. His son Jotham came to the throne, and then Jotham's wicked son Ahaz followed. It was the end of an age. Gone was the era of prosperity and peace. A time of war and ruin followed. The northern kingdom Israel went to war with Syria, and drew the attention of Assyria. The deadly Assyrian Empire attacked the northern kingdom of Israel and almost attacked the southern kingdom of Judah.

- d. Isaiah probably felt a sense of doom and foreboding. Uzziah was a good king who went sour. What would become of the kings after him? Maybe the best days were behind...
  - e. So this was a good time for God to remind Isaiah and the Jewish people that He was their true king.
3. What do you think this encounter was like between God and Isaiah, in the vision? Examine v.1 – 5
    - a. Illus: Now I'm not usually awed by much. But my family once went to Niagara Falls. We took one of the 'Maid of the Mist' boats right up to the Horseshoe Falls. The boat stopped a safe distance away, but I was in awe. *First, there was the wind and water.* Even though we were wearing one of those plastic hoodies that they give you to wear, whatever is exposed gets totally drenched, and somehow the water finds its way to your clothes anyway. *Second, there was what*

*we saw, or couldn't see:* On that day, it was hard to look directly at the Falls because there was a strong wind that whipped the mist into my eyes. I couldn't even see the middle portion of the Falls because there was so much mist. It's like a mysterious veil that you know is right there. Then, *third, there's the sound:* Tons of water crashes down all around you from 175 feet above your head into the river below, so the sound is like thunder going on and on. Then there's the force of the water. The river is churning white all around you. The river is 180 feet deep at the point of the falls, so you get a sense that you're suspended right in between all this rushing water. Boy if something ever went wrong with the boat, you'd be history! The power in all the water crashing down would just crack rocks, not to mention boats and human bones, beneath it.

- b. Hold on to that feeling of awe. I want to combine it with a feeling of unworthiness. There was one moment that stands out in my mind when I felt really unworthy. It was when I was praying with two very godly women. One of them was named Jennifer Espinosa. The other was a Catholic nun whom I only knew as Sister Margarita. I was living in East Palo Alto, CA in a Mexican immigrant community. These two women and I met just for a simple prayer time, to pray for our neighbors and friends. But I knew how much sacrifice these women had made. I knew to some degree what pains they had suffered and the sacrifices they had made. And so when I heard them pray, I wept. Their prayers were simple but deep, filled with such personal knowledge of people that they had loved for years. I, on the other hand, had barely begun to know that neighborhood. I was a kid just out of college. I felt like I was totally unworthy to be there. I felt the urge to run away.
  - c. Put those feelings of awe and unworthiness together, and you get a little of what it's like to be in God's presence.
    - i. First, you feel like you are drowning in the majesty of God. He was so tall, His head was in the heavens,<sup>1</sup> 'lofty and exalted' (Isa.6:1). 'The train of His robe [was] filling the temple.' God's majesty drives out any pretense of human pride. This was the place that Uzziah dared to act presumptuously and was stricken with leprosy. No wonder – something went wrong with his heart, and the majesty of God filled the space around him and revealed on the outside what had just happened on the inside: he became unclean and diseased. When God's majesty fills the place, you are welcome to bow in humility. But there is no room left for your ego. The force of His glory will turn it inside out and push it out so you have to deal with it.
    - ii. Second, there was what you can see and can't see. These angels are seraphim, which means 'fiery' (Ex.3:1 – 6; 13:21; 19:18; Lev.10:1 – 2; Num.11:1 – 2; 1 Ki.18:24). Fire converts mass into energy, and these beings burn with a fire of purity that burns away anything impure. Their power is to represent the holiness of God. Yet even these amazing and strange beings can't see God face to face directly, so they covered their faces with their wings. Nor can they expose the lowliest parts of their bodies, their feet, before God, so they covered their feet with their wings. If these powerful beings can't be fully exposed to God, how can you and I? What cover would we hide under? What parts of ourselves would we feel ashamed of?
    - iii. Third, there's the sound. The angels thundered in a triple chorus, 'Holy,' making the foundations tremble. To repeat something three times in the Hebrew Bible is to say that it is the utmost of that quality. God is 'holy' beyond our comprehension. Over and over, you hear them declare that God is the Lord of the heavenly armies, who actually fills the earth with His glory, too, if we have eyes to see it. So how do we respond to this God? Well, how does Isaiah respond? He responds by letting God burn something away from him.
4. The Cleansing: v.6 – 7
- a. Although this was a vision, what do you think it 'felt' like? That has got to hurt! Isaiah doesn't record the physical pain that this must have caused him, even if it was in the vision and not in 'real life.'

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<sup>1</sup> Physical appearance reflects moral and ontological significance. Hence, God is tall here, much like how Tolkien described Galadriel's spiritual form. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1973), p.473, "She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful."

- b. Illus: Last summer, my family and I went camping in the Berkshires. I was sitting on a chair with my back towards the campfire. I cinder popped off a wooden log, burned a small hole through the back of my shirt, and touched my skin. I jumped up in pain. And that was a tiny little thing. In Isaiah's vision, God takes a burning coal and touches Isaiah's lips with it. Ouch!!
- c. Why does Isaiah focus in on the sin/uncleanness of the lips?
- i. Because 'I am a man of unclean lips.' He needs to be purified to proclaim God's word. And to say some godly things, you need to let God purge out the selfish things.
  - ii. Because he lives 'among a people of unclean lips.'
    1. Corruption and lying in government (Isa.1:10, 17, 23, 27; 3:14 – 15). Youth gangs run the streets, presumably with terrorizing words (Isa.3:5). Sin is everywhere.
    2. Application: In what sense do we live 'among a people of unclean lips'?
      - a. Sarcasm
      - b. Deception
      - c. People-pleasing
      - d. Verbal attacks
      - e. Self-promotion
    3. And to speak into that situation, to call the people back to God, is going to take a word from God. Especially when God is the One who speaks new life into being. He spoke life into being in Genesis 1. He will speak new life or renewed life into being now.
    4. Isaiah is essentially saying what Jesus would say seven centuries later: 'The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, adulteries, murders...' and so on (Mt.15:18 – 19).
    5. So cleansing the lips, purging the evil from the lips, is a symbol of cleansing the heart. It is taking a burning coal to the heart. Just as Isaiah had said earlier: 'I will also turn My hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye, and will remove all your alloy' (Isa.1:25). God's burning holiness is like this fiery coal.
- d. Illus: Perhaps that is why this experience is not merely painful, but also joyful. Richard Rolle, and English Christian writing in 1343, described this experience as 'The Fire of Love.' Here is what he wrote:

'The time I first felt my heart begin to warm—I have been amazed more than I am able to say. I felt it truly, not simply in my imagination, but just as though my heart was burning with a physical fire... It was so vivid an experience that often I put my hand against my chest just to see if I could feel any cause for the heat outwardly! But once I knew that it was purely a matter of inward, spiritual nature... I realized it had to be a gift from my Creator. Accordingly I was glad, and melted with a desire for a greater experience of love... Truly it enflames the soul just as if a real fire were burning there.'<sup>2</sup>

- e. Illus: This is a good exemplary quote from Ambrose (337 – 394 AD), bishop of Milan, teacher of Augustine of Hippo. Early Christian teachers and leaders regularly spoke this way:

'And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love* (ca. 1343), in David Lyle Jeffrey (editor), *The Law of Love: English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p.183 – 184. Later, John Wesley and Blaise Pascal were others who spoke of their hearts being strangely warmed.

the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: "A fire shall burn in His sight." For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.' (Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170)

- f. *Illus:* The early Christians made a connection between Isaiah's fiery coal and *Jesus' practice of communion!* They saw communion as purifying, because Jesus is purifying.<sup>3</sup> And they wove this into the orders of Christian prayers and worship in service (liturgies).
- i. John of Damascus (676 – 749 AD) says, 'Let us draw near to Him with burning desire and... let us take hold of the divine coal, so that the fire of our longing, fed by the flame of the coal, may purge away our sins and enlighten our hearts. Let us be enkindled by touching this great divine fire, and so come forth as gods.' (John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith* 4.13)
  - ii. *The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* has the priest pronounce, 'Lo, this has touched your lips and has taken away your iniquity.' This liturgy was written by John Chrysostom (349 – 407 AD), archbishop of Constantinople from 397 – 407 AD, and has been used ever since in Eastern Orthodox Churches. In fact, it is the most celebrated Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite, a group of liturgies used by Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Catholics, Anglican, and Lutheran communities. It is second only to the Roman Rite used in Catholic Churches.
  - iii. *The Divine Liturgy of St. James* refers to 'receiving the fiery coal' of communion. Some believe this Liturgy is the oldest complete form of Eastern liturgies. It comes from the early Christian church in Jerusalem, and is ascribed to James the brother of Jesus, who was the leader, or one of the leaders, of the Jerusalem Christian community. Probably, though, the Liturgy was refined and organized by Cyril of Jerusalem (313 – 386 AD), bishop of Jerusalem from 350 AD. Cyril was working with liturgies that he simply passed on, even if he did modify it. In any case, the early Christians associated Isaiah's burning coal with the communion bread, and to Jesus because of the connection Jesus made between himself and the eucharist.
5. The Mission: v.8 – 13
- a. (state) But once God burns that stuff away, what does He do with us? He sends us on His mission. We see that in v.8 – 10.
  - b. What will this mission be like? People won't like it. They will not turn around. It sounds as if God doesn't want people to come back to Him, and be healed. So what's going on? How many of us would want an assignment like that? Make the people tired of hearing you? That sounds...weird and painful! Jesus quotes this very section when he tells parables (Mt.13:11 – 17). Now it's not that God wanted Isaiah, Jesus, or us to speak gibberish. It's also not that God is rejecting people. It's just that when you say something for so long to people, they stop listening. Familiarity will breed contempt. The freshness of these words will no longer charge people up. Verses 11 – 13 explain more.
  - c. *Illus:* In their book, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tell of the old Baptist country preacher who was called to a church in rural Georgia. The church had tried to call a series of other pastors – better preachers, by reputation – and had failed. So they turned to this lay preacher. After they hired him and heard one of his sermons they informed him

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Henry Reardon, *Reclaiming the Atonement: An Orthodox Theology of Redemption, Volume One: The Incarnation* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2015), p.51 – 55

that the church did not want any newfangled ideas and definitely did not want any ‘colored’ members. The next Sunday that preacher preached a sermon against this racial attitude, telling them, ‘If you love Jesus, you’ve got to love everybody Jesus loved.’ A number of the congregation told him they did not like such attitudes. Still, the preacher persisted, saying, ‘If you love Jesus, you’ve got to love everybody Jesus loves.’ Many people left the congregation in protest. A number of African-American people joined. More people left. ‘I preached that congregation down to almost nothing before it started to grow again,’ said the preacher. ‘And then it grew and grew into a strong, inclusive congregation. Like I said,’ the preacher explained, ‘if you love Jesus, you’ve got to love everybody Jesus loves.’

- d. That is very much like what Isaiah is describing here. There will be a process of narrowing down God’s true people. First, Babylon is going to take Israel into exile. That’s what the phrase in v.11 – 12 means: ‘Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant, houses are without people and the land is utterly desolate, the LORD has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.’
  - i. Once the Israelites became a small minority in the big bad foreign land, they just wanted to protect their cultural identity, which they thought was just cultural and ethnic. They interpreted themselves as victims.
  - ii. When European-American settlers were a small minority in the world of Native Americans and European powers, they just wanted to protect their cultural identity, which they thought was just cultural and ethnic. They interpreted themselves as victims. ‘We keep aiming for religious freedom and fight state control.’
  - iii. In the same way, back then, the Israelites became more and more focused on their own pain and their own purity. They read Isaiah and the other prophets, but it got old. God’s vision lost its freshness. It became too burdensome to actually dream about. For six to seven hundred years, reciting God’s vision became ritual. So when Jesus began his ministry in Nazareth in Luke 4 and said that he wanted to show God’s grace to the *Gentiles*, quoting Isaiah itself, they were furious and tried to throw him off a cliff! God tells Isaiah up front that His big vision of reaching all the nations would not be too exciting for Israel. His preaching is going to last a long time, during his lifetime, and even longer through this writings. Listening, they will not perceive. Looking, they will not understand. They will get used to this language, this prophecy, but it will become old hat, familiar, and no longer fresh and cutting. That is why they will not return to God to be healed, according to v.10.
- e. Yet, second, they will need to be purified even more, in v.13: ‘<sup>13</sup> Yet there will be a tenth portion in it, and it will again be subject to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.’ God will start over. He will purify the people down to...actually, down to one person: Jesus. Jesus is that holy seed, the stump. And from that seed and on that stump of Jesus, God will build a renewed Israel, the disciples, who would love everybody Jesus loves. And from there, the tree will grow again. *Our obedience is not even just our own. We organically participate in Jesus’ life and faithfulness and obedience to the Father. But we must!!!*
- f. But let’s not fool ourselves. It’s not that growth is easy. The same thing still happens. The top priority in our Gathering mission statement now is to call people to be transformed by Jesus as we ourselves are being transformed. But when we first put that in the mission statement, some people were uncomfortable with it. There are times that it makes me uncomfortable, too, because it’s so radical. But for people to love everybody Jesus loves – and *with his love, in the way he loves them, calling for them to submit themselves to his purifying touch* – that’s hard.
- g. Illus: When I worked at Intel in the late 1990’s, before I moved to Boston, I really wanted people to come to know Jesus. I wanted my coworkers to find their identity in Jesus, not in their performance, or relationships, or whatever. But that meant that I had to find my identity in Jesus, and let Jesus burn away all the rest. The parts of me that put my identity in my performance, or relationships, or whatever – those things I needed to surrender to him.