

Secondly, Isaiah may well have been disturbed by the sight of seraphs coming on God's authority to cleanse him; Isaiah would have recognised a cherub or an angel; but six winged seraphs appear nowhere else in scripture or Israel's history! What did they represent? Merely another form of angelic being? It is possible that the Lord used these heavenly beings for the task of cleansing because Isaiah would only have known about them through contacts with other nations. In other words, in accepting the cleansing by the touch of the seraph, Isaiah had to trust God to use an angelic being he had not come across before, perhaps one related to another nation! You may think this strange, but if you have followed these studies in Isaiah, you will know that the scandalous theme which developed in the previous chapter was that God would judge his people through the nations! Perhaps God was asking Isaiah to experience for himself something which was central to his own prophetic message; the fact that God was bigger than the confines of the Temple and the concepts of His own people.

God cleansed Isaiah and made him worthy of a higher calling by atoning for his sins, unilaterally (6:7). This is a unique moment in scripture, because God had done this for no-one else. Now if God did this for Isaiah, then it is fairly certain that it was His intention to do the same for others; if sins were to be overcome, then God would do it through atonement. How this was to work we have yet to find out, but it is here above all that the lines between story and prophecy become blurred. Isaiah was experiencing himself what God would one day do for all who had faith in Him.

Application

It may be that you have had an experience of the majesty and authority of God and have been 'transported' in a visionary sense to see things which were otherwise unknown to you. In this case, you will have some idea of what Isaiah went through and the complex and apparently contradictory things which happened and yet were still important for God's revelation to you. Such things happen in different ways to different people, sometimes more often than we imagine, and many people who have had such experiences can be very cautious about speaking of them for fear of ridicule, particularly by church leaders or authorities. It is important however that we do all we can to give each other permission to share our experiences of such 'supernatural' experiences of God. He will often show us things which are deeply important for us and for others, and unless we talk about it or use such experiences as a springboard for other things, then we may well fall short of the Lord's will and purpose for our lives.

What happened to Isaiah was that at the conclusion of this great experience of the majesty of God, he heard the Lord's voice saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' and he replied positively without hesitation (6:8). Whatever doubts Isaiah had about his own people, or perhaps even seraphs, he was able to demonstrate his trust in God and show his willingness to act immediately on his call. This manner of readiness is what God calls His people to all the time, and it is a challenge to both you and me.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what is meant by the word 'holy'. What do people think it means, and what does the Bible say it means?
2. If you found yourself in the presence of Almighty God, how do you think you would react.
3. How are people cleansed from their sins today? How can we do this more effectively.

Discipleship

Each one of us will experience God in different ways, because we are all individuals; however, as Christians, Jesus should be the common thread, or common theme of all our experiences. Passages such as Isaiah 6 challenge us to look at our own experiences in a different light, and this can be helpful. The great story of Isaiah's call is a powerful reminder to us that God is always at work doing things in ways which we do not necessarily expect. Are we ready for new challenges?

Final Prayer

Bless us, Lord God, so may we be a blessing to others. Enable us to be consistent in our faith for the sake of those who depend on the example of our faith, and help us to live the kind of life which is a true witness to You, the One in whom we believe. Sustain us in Your power we pray; for Your name's sake: AMEN.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice in all you have done for us, even though we often fail to fully understand it; we rejoice in your love, Your life, Your ministry, Your death, and Your resurrection. Give us the grace to respond to what You have done by offering all we have in Your service, and being content to follow Your guidance in all things. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Burma

Pray today for the desperate attempts of relief agencies to enter the country of Burma to help the desperately needy people of the Irrawaddy Delta, where large numbers of people have been killed, and those who have survived have become destitute. Pray against the cruel abuses of power which prevent people from being assisted in the midst of their tragedy.

Meditation

The love of God is constant, never ending,
 Even though we have never deserved it:
 It is infinitely expressive and overtly joyful,
 Even when we are moody or down:
 It is forever undeserved and supremely generous,
 Even when we have sinned against others:
 It is overwhelmingly happy and totally kind,
 Even when we are complaining and grumpy:
 It is powerfully caring, and utterly unselfish,
 Even when we are absorbed by ourselves:
 It is completely satisfying and full of reward,
 Even when we are impossible to satisfy:
 It is awesomely true and profoundly real,
 Even when we are contrary and stubborn.
 For the love of God is present for all
 And remains so from now and for ever.

Bible Study - Isaiah 6:1-8

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, raised and exulted; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs took their stance above Him. Each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And each one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; everything in all the earth is His glory!' ⁴ At the sound of this cry, the foundations of the thresholds shook and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ Then I said: 'Woe is me! I am ruined; for 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!' ⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand that he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷ And he touched my mouth with it and said: 'Look, this has touched your lips! Your guilt has gone, and your sin has been atoned!' ⁸ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' So I said, 'Here am I! Send me.'

Review

This story has inspired millions, and there can hardly be a Christian who has not heard this passage and been profoundly moved. Strictly speaking, this is not prophecy but the story of a call, yet the power of the vision blurs the boundaries between story and prophecy. It is an unparalleled prophetic vision of the presence of Almighty God, it is the personal experience of Isaiah who was drawn to a place of total submission to God, it is a description of the holiness of God that transcend time and

place, and it is so much more. For us, it is also one of those most precious of commodities in Scripture; the record of a personal testimony describing a life changing encounter with the Lord.

There is no doubt that this vision changed Isaiah's life and redefined his future prophetic call. Isaiah was already a prophet who lived and worked in Jerusalem, and this is why a series of his prophecies are recorded in Isaiah 1-5, before his great call. As a faithful servant and prophet of God, this passage records his calling to a different and special prophetic ministry, and we will discover the details of this new prophetic ministry tomorrow, when we have read the strange second half of Isaiah 6 (6:9-13).

The vision seems to have happened in the Temple, but this is only a presumption. Isaiah's vision describes features of the Temple (6:1f.), but there is no reason why the vision could not have been seen elsewhere. Some conclude that Isaiah was a priest engaged in Temple duties rather like Zechariah in Luke 1, but the text does not say this. Most people in Jerusalem knew the layout and function of the Temple even if the high priest alone was allowed to enter the holy place, and most could picture the inner sanctuaries (see Exodus 35-40). Yet ultimately, it does not matter where Isaiah saw the vision or what he was doing. The vision profoundly affected the whole of Isaiah's life and through him, has affected all God's people, as we will increasingly discover.

As the vision began, Isaiah was filled with concern for the people of God, as his earlier prophecies show, and he was deeply aware of both God's righteous judgement and His love for His people. But at a critical time in the life of the nation (when king Uzziah died – 6:1) what would God do? While thinking about this, Isaiah was confronted by a vision of the glory of God in awesome magnificence (6:1-3), and while caught up in the vision, the Lord purified him in power and authority by the touch of a burning coal (6:6,7). It dawns on us, as it gradually dawned on Isaiah, that in this way, God had chosen him for a special task. We discover later on that He intended to use Isaiah to prophesy the answer to the problems already revealed to him (chapters 1-5), the conundrum between His absolute justice and His love for Israel and all people.

However, God wanted to work with Isaiah in a genuine partnership, and not use him as a puppet. So the Lord called Isaiah from the awesome council of heavenly authority, and gave him a choice; *'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' Without hesitation, Isaiah replied with words that have become precious to all God's people, because they encapsulate Isaiah's heartfelt response to God's call; 'Here am I! send me.'* (6:8)

There is much here to inspire us. This is a story of God's call, which is deeply meaningful to all who have been called to God's service. The passage helps us learn more about God's nature, His holiness, His presence, His authority over heaven and earth, and supremely, His authority over us and over sin. Isaiah 6 happened more than two and a half thousand years ago, and the sights, sounds and smells of the Temple of Solomon are unknown to us. Yet through the record of this vision, we catch a glimpse of God working in power in the life of the man God chose to prophesy the coming of His Messiah; and by His grace, it speaks to us as well.

Going Deeper

There is an enormous amount of literature written about this passage, and almost any commentary you can find will explain the details of the passage. There are a number of features to the story which are in fact quite strange to us, moreover, the translation of them from Hebrew is far from straightforward. By looking more fully at a few interesting points, we will develop our understanding of this passage considerably.

The Lord on His throne! (6:1)

Isaiah had his vision of the Lord 'sitting on His throne' in the year King Uzziah died. It was a time of uncertainty, and the records in scripture (2 Chronicles 26:3-23) tell us that King Uzziah although in many ways a good king, had committed a terrible sin by going into the Temple sanctuary himself to perform sacrifices to God. Such actions by a king were expressly forbidden since the time of Saul and David (1 Sam 13) to ensure that the king in Jerusalem knew his place under God's authority. Isaiah would have witnessed these events, and deeply felt the desecration of the Temple by Uzziah. In his vision, however, Isaiah saw the Lord gloriously seated in authority again; emphatically 'raised and exalted' and with His presence filling the whole Temple (signified by the 'hem of His robe'). The Lord Himself was higher, more authoritative and more majestic than any king who tried to usurp his authority!

The Old Testament often describes God as accompanied by heavenly being. In Genesis 3:24 they are 'cherubs', and these human-like but winged characters were carved into the details of the Temple and in particular, the 'mercy seat', a bench which covered the 'ark of the Covenant' in the centre of the Temple; the 'Holy of Holies' (Ex 25:18f. and 1 Kings 6:24f.). Most people think of them as representations of some kind of angelic being, but in reality, 'seraphs' are only mentioned here in the whole Bible, and no-one is very sure about what they were or what they represented!

There is one clue which we should follow about these 'seraphs', which is that there is some evidence in the ancient world that 'seraphs' were the names of angelic beings in which some nations believed, and they were strongly related to 'fire' (see 2 Kings 17:31). The Hebrew word 'seraph' comes from the word for 'fire' which is 'sarap'. The significance of this is not obvious, but will become clearer as the passage unfolds.

'Holy, Holy, Holy ... the earth is His glory!' (6:3)

Isaiah saw these angelic beings, and like most others (for example Abraham or Moses) who came across God's angels or other angelic beings, he would not have been sure what he was seeing even though he could describe them visually! The seraphs called out to each other to affirm the holiness of Almighty God (6:3). 'Holy' means that God is different from us by His very nature, and the word means 'separate'; as the creator of the world, He is also perfect and pure. In comparison, we are God's creatures and different from Him because we are not perfect, and we can only become 'holy' if God makes us so. Throughout the Bible the concept of holiness is reserved for God and for those things or people God chooses to bless, and therefore 'make holy'.

The great cry of the seraphs 'Holy, holy, holy ...' has been one which Christians have taken up in hymns and songs over centuries in order to give glory to God, and most of us remember the words. The verse is even more interesting however, because of what comes next; 'everything in all the earth is His glory!' Now, you will probably find that your own version of the Bible says 'all the earth is full of His glory', but the reason I have translated this slightly differently is because the Hebrew makes an important point. What it says is that all of creation is a demonstration of God's glory; not that God's glory is something which 'infuses' creation. It can change our view of the world radically if we think of it not as something into which we have to delve in order to find the mysteries of God's glory; but rather that everything we come across in the world is already evidence of God, just as we find it and just as it is, and whether it seems easy or hard to see.

You may recall from earlier studies that Isaiah hints in chapter 5 that God is able to use all creation to do His will, not just His people. It is extremely important that we find this theme carried over into this passage of scripture, announced by the seraphs!

'Woe is me!' (6:5)

While the seraphs could call out their praise to God, Isaiah knew that he was compromised. As a Judean person he stood before God as not as a self righteous prophet with his rehearsed complaints about the people, but as one of God's sinful people himself. From our point of view it is as if we had a vision of God and instead of opening our mouths to complain to God about all the other Christians in the world, we immediately felt guilt at the church's divisions and sins today! Some commentators feel that because Isaiah accepted this 'representative' role, he must have been a priest, but this is not said anywhere. It may well have been that God found Isaiah an acceptable servant and prophet because he did not take a 'holier than thou' attitude towards other people of his day. He knew his place before God, and he knew that he was, as we would say, a sinner (6:5), and as such, the vision clearly frightened him. A Judean such as Isaiah would not have felt comfortable 'seeing' God even in a vision; from their understanding of God, He might consume any human being because of their sin. There were a number of stories of such happenings in the ancient stories of Moses and the forefathers (e.g. Lev 10:1, 2 Kings 1).

Cleansed by the seraph's coal (6:6,7)

One seraph, or angelic being of unknown origin, came and brought a burning ember from the fire on the altar (6:6) with which to cleanse Isaiah. Two things are worth bearing in mind about this. One is that people have often assumed Isaiah was in the 'Holy of Holies' when having this vision, but there was no altar in the inner sanctuary (if you have some maps in your Bible you may well find that it has a 'plan' of the Temple). The altar on which animals were killed and offered up to God was in the sanctuary of the Temple, but not the 'Holy of Holies'. This vision transcends the 'geography' of the Temple and we should be wary to assume too much from the little information Isaiah gives us, particularly in a vision.