

## 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

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And each one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; everything in all the earth is His glory!' <sup>4</sup> At the sound of this cry, the foundations of the thresholds shook and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> 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!' <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand that he had taken from the altar with tongs. <sup>7</sup> 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!' <sup>8</sup> 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

Here is a passage of scripture which has inspired millions for centuries, and there can hardly be a Christian who has not read, studied or heard this passage expounded, and not been profoundly moved. Strictly speaking this is not prophecy, of course, but the story of a prophet's call. However, the power and potency of the passage blurs the boundaries between story and prophecy. Some will find in this passage a prophetic

vision of the presence of Almighty God, the like of which is almost unparalleled in scripture; some will connect immediately with the personal experience of Isaiah, who is drawn through the vision to a place of complete submission to the will of God; some find this passage to be a description of the holiness of God which may have originated in Solomon's Temple but seems to transcend time and place. Despite all this, there is much, much more within this very powerful text, perhaps because it reads like that most precious of commodities in scripture; a personal testimony of a profound spiritual event.

There is little doubt that this passage was written by Isaiah to describe the vision through which he received a special prophetic call (6:8) and we will learn more about what Isaiah was called to say and do for the Lord when we study the second half of chapter 6. It is likely that Isaiah was already a prophet who lived and worked in Jerusalem, and this vision occurred most probably in the Temple. Some have suggested Isaiah was engaged in priestly duties which took him to the heart of the Temple, to the 'Holy of Holies' (rather like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in Luke 1:5-23f.), but the passage does not give us conclusive evidence of this, or exactly where Isaiah was or what he was doing. All this passage does is to describe a vision.

The prophecies in Isaiah chapters 1-5 represent the deep and heartfelt concerns of Isaiah as a prophet in his early years, and this event was clearly a turning point. Isaiah was deeply aware of the sins of Judah, and of both God's righteous judgement and also 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 to His people? How would He deal with their sin and rebellion? (e.g. 5:1f.) Remarkably, our passage tells us that God revealed Himself to Isaiah personally in holiness and glory (6:3) using signs of power and authority (6:1,2,4), and Isaiah himself was purified; as we read in the small story about him being cleansed by the touch of a burning coal (6:6,7). It dawns on us, as it gradually dawned on Isaiah, that God had chosen him for a special task and was preparing him for it. God intended to use Isaiah himself to prophecy the answers to the conundrum he had already revealed (chapters 1-5). However, God wanted to work with Isaiah in a genuine, not a forced partnership. Isaiah heard the Lord calling as if from the council of all heavenly authority; 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' His instant response without hesitation came with words which have become immediately recognisable; 'Here am I! send me.' (6:8)

There is so much here for us all to be inspired by. The whole story features God's call, and its details are deeply meaningful to people who have been called by God to various forms of service. There are also tremendous riches in this passage which help us learn more about the nature of God, for example; about His holiness, His presence, His authority over all heaven and earth, and supremely, His authority over sin,. The passage is clearly set at a time far distant from ours, and the sights sounds and smells of the ancient Temple of Solomon are simply unknown to us, but somehow through these amazing words, we capture a glimpse of God working in power in the life of one man, Isaiah. And by God's 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 exulted' 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.

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.