
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON VI : ISAIAH'S VISION OF THE HOLY GOD (6: 1-13)

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C. Judah's True Hope: The Messianic King (6:1-12:6)

1. Isaiah's Vision of the Holy God (6:1-13)

a. The vision itself (6:1-7)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two 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. "Woe to 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." 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." (NIV)

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, 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 mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. (KJV)

In the year of the death of king Uzziah — I see the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and His train is filling the temple. Seraphs are standing above it: six wings hath each one; with two [each] covereth its face, and with two [each] covereth its feet, and with two [each] flieth. And this one hath called unto that, and hath said: "Holy, Holy, Holy, [is] Jehovah of Hosts, The fulness of all the earth [is] His glory." And the posts of the thresholds are moved by the voice of him who is calling, and the house is full of smoke. And I say, "Wo to me, for I have been silent, For a man — unclean of lips [am] I, And in midst of a people unclean of lips I am dwelling, Because the King, Jehovah of Hosts, have my eyes seen." And flee unto me doth one of the seraphs, and in his hand a burning coal, (with tongs he hath taken [it] from off the altar,) and he striketh against my mouth, and saith: "Lo, this hath stricken against thy lips, And turned aside is thine iniquity, And thy sin is covered." (YLT)

*"Isaiah has now established the backdrop against which he worked as a prophet. The people to whom he was sent were the heirs of great promises but appear to have forfeited them. By the end of his prefatory chapters, darkness has closed in upon them. Grace has been exhausted; nothing but judgement lies ahead. As we shall see, this is the position which Isaiah sketches in a very dramatic way in 6:1, but by the end of this section, darkness (6:1) has been replaced by singing (12:2,5) and salvation (12:2,3), and the Lord in all His holiness (6:1-3) is dwelling in Zion in the midst of His people (12:6). **Darkness and judgment, then, do not, after all, have the last word. Far from it, for the very promises that appeared to have been forfeited — the David-promises of***

1:25-27 and the Zion-promises of 4:2-6 — are the very things that come to pass (9:1-7; 11:1-9; 12:1-6). The exhausting of grace (5:4) has been superseded by the triumph of grace.” [Motyer, *Isaiah*]

The thrust of this chapter might be taken in the entire context of death: the dying king, v1; the prophet under the sentence of death, v5; the sacrificial animal dead on the alter, v6; and the felled tree, v13. ***But death does not have the final say: the king lies dead (v1) but it turns out to be only the felling of a tree and life remains in the root (v13), the prophet lies dead, struck down by sin under divine holiness (v5) but when the seraph approaches, it is with the fires of an atoning sacrifice (v7).***

“Isaiah is outside, near the altar in front of the temple. The doors are supposed to open, and the veil hiding the Holy of Holies to be withdrawn, unfolding to his view a vision of God represented as an Eastern monarch, attended by seraphim as His ministers of state (1 Kings 22:19), and with a robe and flowing train (a badge of dignity in the East), which filled the temple. This assertion that he had seen God was, according to tradition (not sanctioned by Isaiah 1:1), the pretext for sawing him asunder in Manasseh's reign (Hebrews 11:37). Visions often occur in the other prophets: in Isaiah there is only this one, and it is marked by characteristic clearness and simplicity.” [Faussett, *JFB Commentary*] “In this vision the ideas are taken in general from royal majesty, as displayed by the monarchs of the East; for the prophet could not represent the ineffable presence of God by any other than sensible and earthly images. The particular scenery of it is taken from the temple. God is represented as seated on his throne above the ark, in the most holy place, where the glory appeared above the cherubim, surrounded by his attendant ministers.... St. John, who has taken many sublime images from the prophets of the Old Testament, and in particular from Isaiah, hath exhibited the same scenery, drawn out into a greater number of particulars; Revelation iv. The veil, separating the most holy place from the holy or outermost part of the temple, is here supposed to be taken away; for the prophet, to whom the whole is exhibited, is manifestly placed by the altar of burnt-offering, at the entrance of the temple, (compare Ezekiel 43:5, 6,) which was filled with the train of the robe, the spreading and overflowing of the Divine glory.” [Clarke, *Commentary*]

POSITION OF THIS CHAPTER — Calvin thinks Isaiah was given the vision for encouragement, to confirm and strengthen him in the discharge of his office. Cp Christ with the apostles: Jn 20:21,22; Acts 2:3. Others (and the most commonly held view today) think this was Isaiah's original call to the ministry, with v5 seemingly supporting this view. “The topic of this chapter is the call of Isaiah, and for this reason alone it would be a fitting ‘chapter 1’ following the ‘author’s preface.’ But like all the prophets who recorded their experience of a call (cp Paul, Gal 1,2), personal facts are told not for their own sake but because they illustrate a vital theme.” [Motyer, *Isaiah*] If this is Isaiah's original call, why is it put here? One probability is that ***Isaiah begins with the heart of his message, and only then does he relate his own prophetic call. “We might have expected the volume of his collected prophecies to begin with it. The book is not alone, however, in deferring reference to the call of God to a later passage (cf. Amos 7:14-15). In fact, our sense of difficulty may well reflect modern Western individualism, for the Bible teaches that the message is far more important than the messenger (Phil 1:15-18). If Isaiah’s oracles are arranged according to a plan determined by the message, then we shall see that the location of this chapter is just perfect.”*** [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

THE DEATH OF THE KING — “Judah had known no king like Uzziah since the time of Solomon. He had been an efficient administrator and an able military leader. Under his leadership Judah had grown in every way (2 Chron 26:1-15). He had been a true king. How easy it must have been to focus one's hopes and trust upon a king like that. What will happen, then, when such a

king dies, and coupled with that death there comes the recognition that a resurgent Assyria is pushing nearer and nearer? In moments like that it is easy to see the futility of any hope but an ultimate one. No earthly king could help Judah in that hour. In the context of crisis, God can more easily make himself known to us than when times are good and we are self-confidently complacent.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] The dates for Uzziah’s death ranges between 748-734 BC. ***Judah never again raised to such a prosperous position, from that point it was a downhill cycle.*** Isaiah may have seen Uzziah therefore as a symbol of Israel: Uzziah had committed a dreadful sin by intruding in the house of God where, as a layman, he had no right to go (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chron 26:16-21). The Lord judged him with leprosy and for the rest of his reign he was alienated from the worshiping community. When death came, the situation was unresolved. Likewise Israel is declared to have overstepped the bounds of grace (5:4) and moving towards judgement under foreign foes (5:13-17, 24-30). An interesting point worth mentioning: while we cannot be certain of exact dates, many scholars date the beginning of Rome at 739 BC, a very probable date for Uzziah’s death. Therefore from the time of Uzziah’s death Judah declined while Rome increased.

THE TEMPLE — “The reader, visualizing the scene, is with Isaiah and feels the raw edge of terror at being where humanity dare not go. It is unimportant whether Isaiah was in the actual temple at the time of the event. In his vision he was there and the reader is with him. Evidently the veil had been removed and there, where the ark should be, is a great throne. Here again the absolute sovereignty of God is being stressed. He alone is king. Hekal [pronounced hee-kale], the word here used for temple, contributes to the concept of God’s kingship. It is a loanword whose ultimate origin ... [was] a term used for the house of the god who was considered to be the king of the city-state.... Its essential meaning was ‘palace,’ but whether the palace of the human king or the divine king depended strictly upon the context. So here the temple is God’s palace. He is king, not Uzziah or Jotham or Ahaz.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “Is it the earthly or the heavenly place of worship? Virtually all modern commentators assume the former, though Delitzsch is an important exception. Some of the older commentators who did assume that the earthly temple was intended doubted whether the prophet was physically present in it and thought it possible that he may have been transported there in a vision.... ***It is really impossible to be certain, but happily it makes little difference to our understanding of the chapter and its message.***” [Grogan, *Isaiah*] “[T]he vision was a divine revelation. It was a revelation given to the prophet in time and space upon this earth, and not in a vacuum. It is to be expected, therefore, that in a formal sense it would have a point of contact with the religious paraphernalia which the prophet would understand. In a formal sense there are relations between the contents of this vision and practices and customs to be found in other religions of antiquity. What was essentially new was the fact that this vision was a revelation of God. It must also be remembered that the pagan religions of antiquity were degenerations from the true, and indeed were imitative of it.” [Young, *Isaiah*]

THE VISION OF GOD UPON HIS THRONE — John correctly states “*No one has ever seen God...*” (John 1:18a; see also 1 Tim 6:16) yet Isaiah is said to have seen the Lord. The answer to this apparent contradiction is that ***no man has ever seen the fullness of God, the divine nature, the essence of who God is.*** Yet the Lord is pleased to condescend to show Himself in human form for the good of His people, as John continues, “*...but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known*” (John 1:18b). **Who then did Isaiah see upon the throne?** — “John tells us that it was Christ (Jn 12:41), and justly, for God never revealed Himself to the fathers but in His eternal Word and only begotten Son.” [Calvin; q.v. Young, *Isaiah*] I once heard someone comment “*When I get to heaven, I expect to see three thrones with each Person of the trinity on*

one throne each.” — Not that this is a critical issue nor should we be divisive, but that presents an inadequate concept of the trinity. ***Throughout eternity the only God we will see is the Person of Jesus Christ, and that will suffice! He alone manifests the fullness of the Godhead; we will never “see” (in the sense of those who believe there will be three thrones in heaven) God the Father nor the Holy Spirit.***

THE TRINITY — Several times throughout this chapter we are confronted with the greatest mystery within the divine nature of God.

- The trinity is hinted to in the ascription made by the seraphs in v3, called “the trisagion”. “The trisagion, or threefold ascription of holiness (cf. Rev 4:8), has been interpreted in reference to the Trinity since the early fathers. Cautious commentators, including Calvin, are inclined to play this down somewhat. He says (in loc.), ‘The ancients quoted this passage when they wished to prove that there are three persons in one essence of the Godhead. I do not disagree with their opinion; but if I had to contend with heretics, I would rather choose to employ stronger proofs.’ It is best for us simply to say that — in the fuller light of the NT — we can see the appropriateness of this threefold expression, which also places added stress on the holiness of the heavenly King. We go to the NT for clear Trinitarian teaching and to the OT for hints of it.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]
- Much clearer and direct is Isaiah’s statement that he saw the LORD JEHOVAH on the throne, yet in John 12:39-41 it is said “*Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him*”, speaking of this vision. In addition to this Paul states it was the Holy Spirit speaking in Isaiah 6:9,10 (Acts 28:25-27).
- Another direct statement is found in v8, “*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’*” “The plural ‘us’ is often linked theologically with v.3 and interpreted in terms of the Trinity. It is an unusual phenomenon, found elsewhere in the OT only in Genesis (1:26; 11:7). Many modern scholars have taken it to be a reference to a council of heavenly beings. There are, of course, many biblical passages that picture God surrounded by the heavenly hosts. Not one of these, however (unless, of course, the present passage is an exception), suggests that he, the omniscient and all-wise God, called on them for advice or even identified them with him in some way in his utterance.... The plural, therefore, suggests either the divine majesty or that fullness of his being that was to find its ultimate theological expression in the doctrine of the Trinity.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*] “***In carrying out His sovereign purposes God consults only with Himself. He has no need of counseling with His creatures, even with angelic creatures. Hence, it would seem wise to adopt the time-honored interpretation of the church and to regard the Lord as using the plural form to indicate that in the Speaker Himself there is a plurality of persons.***” [Young, *Isaiah*]

THE IMMANENCY OF CHRIST — (immanent = the sense of *nearness, closeness*; contrast with *distant, far off, remote*) “[T]his passage, insisting as it does on the awesome transcendence of the sovereign God, also emphatically teaches his immanence. His transcendence is not remoteness, or aloofness but is known through his presence in his created world and temple. Divine transcendence and immanence are always held in balance in biblical theism. Isaiah himself says later (12:6), ‘Great is the Holy One of Israel among you.’” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

THE SERAPHS — Here we see a reference to creatures found no place else in scriptures. Seraph is literally *burning ones*, the word being also used in Num 21:6; Isa 14:29; 30:6 to refer to “fiery

serpents.” Some scholars therefore believe these were serpent-like or dragon-like in appearance, but more likely is the emphasis upon the term “fiery” so the reference to snake is merely a reference to their bite. They are personal, spiritual beings. They have faces, feet and hands, they employ human speech and understand moral concepts. Note these are not the same as cherubim because their functions were quite different (Ez 1:22; Rev 4:6). Cherubim are over the mercy seat, and in Ezekiel are said to have four wings. The seraphim are the creatures standing above the throne as attendants. ***“It is evident from references in Scripture to angels, archangels, principalities, powers, cherubim, seraphim, etc., that there is a great variety among the heavenly beings created by God. This should occasion no surprise, for the created earth too is the scene of great diversity.”*** [Grogan, *Isaiah*] Each had three sets of wings. ***In awe and humility, one set covered their faces*** — “The sight of God wrought humility in the beholder, and the covering of the face would also preclude any irreverent beholding of the Lord. Perhaps also we may not be wrong in assuming that the glory of the Lord was so great that just as one cannot look directly at the sun for its brightness, so one could not look directly at the majestic figure seated upon the throne.” [Young, *Isaiah*] ***One set covered their feet*** — the exact meaning here is uncertain. Some take this to indicate the seraphs covered the lower parts of their body, not just their feet; but whether their lower parts of the body or only their feet, the inference is their humility. “By the feet the Hebrews mean all the lower parts of the body. But the people of the East generally wearing long robes, reaching to the ground, and covering the lower parts of the body down to the feet, it may hence have been thought want of respect and decency to appear in public and on solemn occasions with even the feet themselves uncovered.... It is a great mark of respect in the East to cover the feet, and to bow down the head in the presence of the king.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] The emphasis might be that of surrender. “The feet are the organs of activity, of directing life towards goals (Ps 18:33; Prov 1:15,16; 4:27). It is impossible to be sure, but perhaps ***they covered their feet to disavow choosing their own path.***” [Motyer, *Isaiah*] ***With one set they flew*** — always ready to serve and obey; perhaps we cannot say they were hovering, yet on the other hand, they were not standing on a solid surface. In the words of one commentator, ***“they are all wings and voice, perfectly ready for praise and service.”***

THE TRISAGION — Holy (Heb, Qadosh), signifying *the entirety of the divine perfections which separates God from His creation*. The root meaning of *holy* is not *sinless* but rather *to separate, to cut off*. ***“It is evident ... that what is holy is distinct from whatever does not pertain to deity. Thus, holiness is distinctness, the distinctness of the divine from all other things.*** There is no reason to believe that the term had any moral connotation about it at the outset. Rather, the character of a given deity determined the character of that which was dedicated to it. This, ***women who were devoted to Baal and Asherah prostituted themselves to the worshipers of these deities and were called holy women*** (Hos 4:14; Gen 38:21). The remarkable about the OT conception of holiness is a function of the OT understanding of God’s character. What was distinct about this deity was not so much his origin, his essence, or his numinous power. Rather, it was his attitude toward ethical behavior.... ‘You shall be holy as I am holy’ (Lev 19:1) does not refer to ritual purity but rather to ethical behavior. Thus for the Hebrews, holiness came to have a very particular ethical cast.... So for Isaiah the announcement of God’s holiness meant that he was in the presence of One so distinct from — other than — himself. But for Isaiah as a Hebrew, it also meant that the terrifying otherness was not merely in essence but in character. Here was One ethically pure, absolutely upright, utterly true.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] ***“Inasmuch as the Lord is holy, He is separate not merely from the creation but also from sin.*** Thus the concept ‘holiness’ also possesses an ethical quality. Being thus separated from sin, holiness is opposed to sin and determined upon its

punishment. ‘The Lord of hosts is exalted in judgement, and God the Holy One is sanctified in righteousness’ (Isa 5:16)... When Isaiah beheld the ‘Holy One’ in the Temple, he was before the One who alone is truly God, utterly separate from His creation and from all that is sinful.”

[Young, *Isaiah*] **What should be our reaction? “Our greatest service to Him also is to be found in praising His name. To praise His name involves more than the mere repetition of the word qadosh. It includes a deep meditation upon God and His attributes and the living of a life of humility in accordance with the precepts laid down in His Word. It is, in other words, the life of faith in Jesus Christ, lived for the glory of God.”** [Young, *Isaiah*]

SINFUL MAN BEFORE A HOLY GOD — the sense of *I am undone* is probably *been made to cease, cut off, undone, doomed to die*. Note it is not Isaiah’s finite existence that crushes him, but his uncleanness. “The seraphs had praised God with pure lips, and this Isaiah could not do. His lips were unclean, and that means that he as a man was unclean. A sinful man, he cannot praise God, and his sinfulness manifests itself at the lips. What Isaiah must do is praise God as the seraphs were doing, but because of his depravity, he could not do this. Those whose natures are sinful cannot praise God as they should. There must first be a cleansing of the heart. *The prophet must first of all be made conscious of his own sin and unworthiness before he can praise God as he should.*” [Young, *Isaiah*] “Such confrontation cannot help but produce despair. For the finite, the mortal, the incomplete, and the fallible to encounter the Infinite, the Eternal, the Self-existent, and the Infallible is to know the futility and the hopelessness of one’s existence.... Existentialism presumes there is no meaning in the universe and that we are thus meaningless. Isaiah knows, more horribly, that there is Meaning, but that he has no part in it.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] **“Reader, lay this to heart; and instead of boasting of thy excellence, and trusting in thy might, or comforting thyself in thy comparative innocence, thou wilt also be dumb before him, because thou hast been a man of unclean lips, and because thou hast still an unclean heart.”** [Clarke, *Commentary*]

THE ASSURANCE OF FORGIVEN SINS — *Note there is no cry for mercy, nor any great vows if God would deliver him. All the evidence is that he considers his condition hopeless. Yet out of the smoke comes a seraph with a purifying coal.* The “hot stone” (Heb, ritzpah) was the stone on which the incense was placed and burned, and hence the scene reflects upon the altar of incense found in Israel’s temple. **“The immediate effect of atonement is reconciliation. Isaiah first saw the Lord afar off (v1), but now he is near enough to overhear the divine musing; he had once been ‘silenced’ by sin (v5) but as the redeemed sinner he is free to speak. The God who shut him out (v4) has brought him home. But he finds that being joined to God means joining a missionary society: he has been brought in in order to be sent out.”** [Motyer, *Isaiah*]

b. The mission of Isaiah the prophet (6:8-13)

<i>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” He said, “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people</i>	<i>Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears</i>	<i>And I hear the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom do I send? and who doth go for Us?” And I say, “Here [am] I, send me.” And He saith, “Go, and thou hast said to this people, Hear ye — to hear, and ye do not understand, And see ye — to see, and ye do not know. Declare fat the heart of this</i>
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calloused; make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate, And the LORD have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. But yet in it shall be a tenth, and it shall return, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them, when they cast their leaves: so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof. (KJV)

people, And its ears declare heavy, And its eyes declare dazzled, Lest it see with its eyes, And with its ears hear, and its heart consider, And it hath turned back, and hath health.” And I say, “Till when, O Lord?” And He saith, “Surely till cities have been wasted without inhabitant, And houses without man, And the ground be wasted — a desolation, And Jehovah hath put man far off, And great [is] the forsaken part in the heart of the land. And yet in it a tenth, and it hath turned, And hath been for a burning, As a teil-tree, and as an oak, that in falling, Have substance in them, The holy seed [is] its substance!” (YLT)

the stump in the land.” (NIV)

THE CALL TO MISSIONS — “Now, for the first time, God speaks. It is as if Isaiah was not ready to hear before this moment, as if the possibility of service could not be appreciated until this time. But for whatever reason, *God makes it plain that while spiritual experience is never merely a means to an end, neither is it an end in itself. Unless that experience issues in some form of lived-out praise to God, it will turn upon itself and putrefy.... That Isaiah is neither directly addressed nor coerced is suggestive. Perhaps it is so because Isaiah does not need coercion, but rather needs an opportunity to volunteer. Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into non-existence by the very holiness of God and having received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God’s service? Those who need to be coerced are perhaps too little aware of the immensity of God’s grace toward them.*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] This explains Pastor’s preaching. Does he push? Does he beg and plead? As much as he is able, all Pastor does is lift up Jesus; the response of the believer’s heart should be freely committed. This does not mean there’s not needs; rather Pastor understands what is being taught here.

It has always amazed me when one professes faith yet needs pushed into service. A Christian does not need dragged to church. One exposed to the grace of God has a burning desire to please and serve his Lord. Pastor Fisher commented once that the test for a true believer is if one loves the Lord, not in verbiage only but in reality and truth. Anyone can “serve” the Lord, anyone can be religious, anyone can go through ritualistic trappings. But only a true believer understands the grace of God and loves Jesus with their whole being.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY AND MAN’S RESPONSIBILITY — the Lord does not have the problem we have of bringing apparent paradoxes together. “[B]iblical teaching presents beautiful balance. This is true in relation to a multitude of themes, and another

example occurs here. The message of God to Isaiah in vv. 9-10 is strongly predestinarian. How appropriate, therefore, that the verse preceding them should place such emphasis on the prophet's responsibility! *He is not coerced into service; rather, his will makes its ready response as a grateful reaction to God's forgiving grace. No doubt Isaiah's very response was itself the product of divine grace, but this is not where the stress falls here. Instead, we see him faced with the challenge to personal commitment.*" [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

A DIFFICULT COMMISSION — One commentator notes almost all sermons on Isa 6 conclude with v8 because the rest of the chapter is disturbing, specially to a generation who have only heard of the love of God, God's forgiving grace and God's willingness for "all to come to repentance". "Yet these verses depict God as preventing repentance so that total destruction may occur."

[Oswalt, *Isaiah*] *Hear ye indeed* (KJV), *be ever hearing* (NIV) — lit "hear a hearing", the Hebrew manner of strongly emphasizing the act of hearing, as in Gen 2:17 "you shall surely die" is Heb "to die you will die". The sense is "Now pay attention ... listen to what I say!" But they would not hear! Pride and rebellion have gone so deeply that those who *hear* (outwardly) will simply twist what they hear to their own pleasure. Therefore Isaiah's commission was not something which would make it easier for the people to believe and repent, rather it would make it more difficult. *"The use of these verses in the New Testament (Mt 13:14,15; Mk 4:12; Lk 8:10; Jn 12:39-41; Acts 28:26,27; Rom 11:8) makes them especially important to understand.... v 9,10 are a very stark statement of the preacher's dilemma: those who resist the truth can be changed only by telling them the truth yet once again — and maybe this further rejection will push them beyond the point of no return and they will become irretrievably hardened in mind and heart (Heb 6:4-8). The human eye cannot see this 'point of no return' in advance — nor necessarily recognize it when it is past, but the all-sovereign God both knows it and indeed appoints it as He presides, with perfect righteousness and justice, over the human psychological processes which He created."* [Motyer, *Isaiah*] *"The doom of the people is inevitably fixed; there is to be no further healing of their sick state; let them now persist in their insensitivity to the voice and will of God: even the prophet's preaching is but to render them blinder, deafer, and more insensitive."*

[Gray; q.v. Young, *Isaiah*] In this sense we are as Paul said, *"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?"* (2 Cor 2:14-16). *The gospel of life becomes the message of death, further condemning and hardening those who hear, making them without excuse.* We do not like to center upon this thinking, but every time we witness, this is part of what's involved in hearing God's word. *It's a serious thing to know the will of God and rebel against it.*

WHY SHOULD GOD DESIRE THE HARDENING OF THE PEOPLE'S HEARTS? — *Evidently there's something more important than healing: the pure revelation of the character of God.* Such a revelation would only serve to further harden those in Israel. So Isaiah was told to preach, knowing his preaching would further harden those who hear. *What was his alternative — to change the message? This might have brought outward results but it would not have truly brought change, plus it would have further destroyed coming generations. But if the truth was preached, even if this generation rejects it and dies, it could, if faithfully recorded, save future generations. This was therefore his commission, not to be successful in a merely human sense but to be faithful.*

WE CANNOT ALTER THE MESSAGE TO ATTRACT CROWDS – *This temptation is strong in our American culture when “how I feel” and “what did I get out of the service?” is rapidly replacing scriptural worship. If a pastor does not cater to every need, touch on self-esteem, make the “worshiper” leave church feeling good, then the service was a dud in the eyes of many Americans. This is one of the reasons for today’s emphasis on the music ministry. Music has a mysteriously powerful effect on people, both in a good sense and in a negative sense. The proper music can truly aid worship (even contemporary music). But the emphasis should be on the word of God and prayer, which admittedly can be dry at times — it should not be, but in our frail, fallen human condition, it is. How do some churches deal with “dry prayer meetings?” — upbeat music which lifts the spirit of those singing / listening and leaves the “worshiper” feeling good. Not intentionally but many churches in our country are departing from the basics in an effort to reach others who normally would not come to a “boring, dry service”. We need to return to the emphasis of true worship which is God-centered and not “I”-centered.*

An opposite lesson might be learned from Isaiah’s commission as well. *I have found myself hesitant to witness to ones I’ve witnessed to time and time again. “They’ve heard it before, all my further witnessing will do is drive them further away from the Lord.” That might be true, but that’s not an excuse for not witnessing. Isaiah was told to tell Judah the truth, knowing full well they would not receive it. His preaching only further hardened them but the Lord told him to continue. We should do the same — even if the only effect is to further harden those who hear.* This is not an excuse to be rude nor a recommendation of pushy-evangelism but rather to encourage us to keep the light shining. *We never know who’s heart the Spirit of God might reach through our witnessing, even to those who’ve heard the message time and time again.*

THE NEGATIVE ASPECT OF PREACHING — The message to the people: hear ye, continually; yet while doing so, God told Isaiah they would not understand. “ ‘Render them the more hardened by thy warnings’ [Maurer]. This effect is the fruit, not of *the truth* in itself, but of the corrupt state of *their hearts*, to which God here judicially gives them over (Isa 63:17).... One must *love* divine things in order to *understand* them.... *Hear, indeed* (Heb, *in hearing hear*), that is, *Though ye hear* the prophet’s warnings *again and again*, ye are doomed, because of your perverse will (John 7:17), *not to understand*. Light enough is given in revelation to guide those sincerely seeking to *know*, in order that they may *do*, God’s will; darkness enough is left to confound the wilfully blind (Isa 43:8). So in Jesus’ use of parables (Matt 13:14).” [Faussett, *JFB Commentary*] *“The doom of the people is inevitably fixed; there is to be no further healing of their sick state; let them now persist in their insensitivity to the voice and will of God: even the prophet’s preaching is but to render them blinder, deafer, and more insensitive.”* [Gray; q.v. Young, Isaiah] In this sense we are as Paul said, *“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?”* (2 Cor 2:14-16). The gospel of life becomes the message of death, further condemning and hardening those who hear, making them without excuse. We do not like to center upon this thinking, but every time we witness, this is part of what’s involved in hearing God’s word. *It’s a serious thing to know the will of God and rebel against it.*

REPROBATION: THE DIVINE JUDGEMENT OF A HARDENED HEART — Even Calvin did not teach reprobation in the sense some Calvinists are accused of teaching. He states in his

Institutes: “*Man falls by the appointment of divine providence, but he falls by his own fault. God’s blinding, hardening and turning the sinner he describes as the consequence of the divine desertion, not the divine causation. The relation of God to the origin of sin is not efficient, but permissive.*” [Calvin; q.v. Strong, *Systematic Theology*] Strong continues in his theology: “But the Scriptures teach that men as sinners, and not men irrespective of their sins, are the objects of God’s saving grace in Christ (Jn 15:9; Rom 11:5, 7; Eph 1:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2). **Condemnation, moreover, is an act, not of sovereignty, but of justice, and is grounded in the guilt of the condemned** (Rom 2:6-11; 2 Thes 1:5-10).... **The decree of reprobation is not a positive decree like that of election but a permissive decree to leave the sinner to his self-chosen rebellion and its natural consequences of punishment.** Election and sovereignty are only sources of good. Election is not a decree to destroy; it is a decree only to save. When we elect a President we do not need to hold a second election to determine that the remaining millions shall be non-Presidents. It is needless to apply contrivance or force. **Sinners, if simply let alone will, like water, run down hill to ruin. The decree of reprobation is simply a decree to do nothing — a decree to leave the sinner to himself.** The natural result of this judicial forsaking, on the part of God, is the hardening and destruction of the sinner. But it must not be forgotten that this hardening and destruction are not due to any positive efficiency of God, they are a self-hardening and a self-destruction and God’s judicial forsaking is only the just penalty of the sinner’s guilty rejection of offered mercy. ‘How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?... my heart is turned within me, my compassions are kindled together ... Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone’ (Hos 11:8; 4:17). ‘What if God, willing to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he afore prepared unto glory’ (Rom 9:22,23). Here notice that ‘which he afore prepared’ declares a positive divine efficiency, in the case of the vessels of mercy, while ‘fitted unto destruction’ intimates no such positive agency of God, the vessels of wrath fitted themselves for destruction. ‘Vessels ... some unto honor, and some unto dishonor’ (2 Tim 2:20). ‘They stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed’ (1 Pet 2:8). ‘Who were of old set forth [RSV: written of beforehand] unto this condemnation’ (Jude 4).... E. G. Robinson (Christian Theology, 313) — ‘Reprobation, in the sense of absolute predestination to sin and eternal damnation, is neither a sequence of the doctrine of election, nor the teaching of the Scriptures.’ Men are not ‘appointed’ to disobedience and stumbling in the same way that they are ‘appointed’ to salvation. God uses positive means to save, but not to destroy. Henry Ward Beecher: ‘**The elect are whosoever will, the non-elect are whosoever won’t.**’ ” [Strong, *Systematic Theology*]

ROMANS 1 MAKES IT CLEAR THAT ONE OF THE DIVINE JUDGMENTS IS TO ALLOW PEOPLE TO LIVE AS THEY PLEASE

– At first hearing, the sinner is excited at such a prospect: “*Living a life without interference, doing whatever I want without my conscience bothering me or without being bothered by rules. It would be a sinner’s paradise!*” But as parents interfere out of love and wanting the best for their children, so the Lord’s Spirit convicts for the well-being of the sinner! **If you are pricked by the word of God, don’t turn from it. The conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit (Jn 16:8). Without the work of God in your heart, not only will you not be saved, you will not even care! — until the day you die and stand naked and undone before a holy God. There will be no saving repentance in that day.** Cp Deut 29:2-4.

THE CALL TO BE FAITHFUL IN “UNSUCCESSFUL” CIRCUMSTANCES — “*One cannot but admire and even love Isaiah for his willingness and readiness to serve God, even though he was told that his labors would appear to be fruitless. From this we learn the necessity for continuing in the work of the gospel, even when outward success does not appear to attend our*

work. It may be that apparent lack of outward success is in part due to our own inefficiency; our task, however, is to be faithful. May God grant that His church may have ministers who, above all else, are faithful, even as was Isaiah." [Young, *Isaiah*]

HOW LONG? — Isaiah's question could be taken in several manners: *how long?* with reference to Isaiah himself, "*How long am I to preach to a people who do not hear?*" Another aspect could be "*How long would the people be like this? How long before the period of grace?*" As the Psalmist said, "Will God always chide? Will He keep His anger forever? Isaiah cannot defend his people, and the judgement was just. But Isaiah was concerned for the nation, prompted for his own compassion toward the people. God's answer to Isaiah was essentially "until judgement falls", fulfilled primarily at the Babylonian captivity, and more fully at the dispersion under the Roman Titus.

THE REMNANT — But as we've frequently seen in Isaiah, a ray of hope is given. Judgement comes but it is not final. God has a remnant, literally *a tenth*. "When Nebuchadnezzar had carried away the greater and better part of the people into captivity, there was yet a tenth remaining in the land, the poorer sort left to be vinedressers and husbandmen, under Gedaliah, 2 Kings 25:12, 22, and the dispersed Jews gathered themselves together, and returned to him, Jer 40:12; yet even these, fleeing into Egypt after the death of Gedaliah, contrary to the warning of God given by the prophet Jeremiah, miserably perished there." [Clarke, *Commentary*] "The devastation, great as it was to be, would not be total; but even its survivors would have to submit to further judgment. The illustration from nature, however, introduces an element of hope. God has so ordered the plant kingdom that almost total destruction does not always extinguish life. He has a continuing purpose of life for the remnant of his people. The word 'seed' in this verse suggests a possible link with the promise given to Abraham that his seed would continue and be blessed by God (Gen 17:18; cf. Isa 51:2). The concept of the seed may take its place with 'branch' and 'servant' as subject to significant development within the Book of Isaiah. It is purely biological, for example, at 5:10, 55:10; designates the people as evil and under judgment in 1:4 [NIV, 'brood'], 14:20 [NIV, 'offspring'], 57:3-4; presents the remnant after judgment here in 6:13; and refers to the 'progeny' of the Servant of the Lord in 53:10 [NIV, 'offspring']. Most frequent of all is the concept of the seed of Jacob that is destined for blessing (e.g., 43:5 [NIV, 'children']; 44:3 [NIV, 'offspring']; 54:3 [NIV, 'descendants']; 66:22 [NIV, 'descendants'])." [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,
"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And
I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

— Isaiah 6:8 NIV