

ISAIAH'S RESPONSE TO GOD'S CALL

Teaching-Learning Resources

BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: 2 Chronicles 26; Isaiah 1:6

Key Passage: Isaiah 6:1–8

[Page 24]

We interrupt the survey of major events in Israel's history, and the decisions which anticipated them, for a biographical glimpse into the life of one of Israel's greatest prophets. A historical sketch of the achievements of King Uzziah will make the biographical study more complete, but the primary focus will be on the call and ministry of Isaiah. The next lesson will move us beyond biography and return us again to the national policies of Judah and the international maneuverings of Israel.

2 Chronicles 26

According to the statement in 2 Chronicles 26:22—“Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz wrote”—Isaiah was particularly interested in King Uzziah. Although this work of Isaiah has not survived, the chronicler indicates that Uzziah was an impressive monarch who restructured the military defenses of Judah and extended Judean control over Edom, Arabia, and the Philistines (2 Chronicles 26:3–15). The writer of 2 Kings 14:22 briefly comments that Uzziah (also named Azariah) rebuilt the port city of Elath. His military and commercial success was attributed to the goodness of God: “. . . and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper” (2 Chronicles 26:5).

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

Thus, as Jeroboam II expanded the borders of the Northern Kingdom to the approximate boundaries of the Solomonic empire, Uzziah was able to accomplish the same for, the Southern Kingdom. In both quantity and quality, Uzziah was able to achieve for Judah what Solomon had earlier achieved for this tribe of Israel. Uzziah was successful without resorting to multiple political marriages, slavery, or oppressive taxation. But Uzziah ended his days in misery rather than glory. He contracted leprosy and died a forsaken hero.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Isaiah 6:1—“In the year that King Uzziah died . . .”

In 742 B.C., the twelfth king of Judah died. According to 2 Chronicles 26:20–21, he died from leprosy. The stipulations for the diagnosis and isolation of the leprous person are detailed as priestly functions in Leviticus 13–14. The disease was believed to be the result of sin, for which atonement could be made only after verification that the diseased person had been healed (Leviticus 14:1–3, 18). The belief that the disease was the result of sin was a part of the ancient Near Eastern orthodoxy repudiated by Job. The priests of Uzziah’s day still accepted that ancient belief and identified Uzziah’s sin, which led to the leprosy, as that of attempting to burn incense to Yahweh. Laymen, including kings, were not to usurp priestly functions. So Uzziah died an isolated man, sick and lonely, having alienated himself from the temple priesthood.

Isaiah 6:1—“. . . I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple.”

When Isaiah said, “I saw the Lord . . . my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts,” he was not speaking of ordinary

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

physical sight. It was a spiritual vision. The same word “see” was used by Isaiah in 30:10 to express the idea of a vision, along with the usual word for vision:

who say to the seers, “See not!”
[i.e., “Do not behold a vision!”];
and to the prophets,
“Prophesy not to us what is right . . .”

Consequently, the verb “to see” is used in Isaiah with two meanings: (1) to see in the ordinary sense—a nonvisionary experience and (2) to see in a visionary experience.

Isaiah 6:1 is best understood as having the latter meaning of a visionary experience. The reality was a spiritual-psychic one that may, or may not, have occurred in the precincts of the temple. The reality exceeded the limited physical environs of the prophet. This visionary experience of Isaiah does not negate statements recorded by John: “God is spirit . . . (John 4:24); “. . . His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen” (5:37); and “No man has ever seen God . . .” (1 John 4:12). The difference between Isaiah and John reflects the difference between physical sight and the visionary experience.

The divine “throne” appears in both prophetic and apocalyptic visions (Ezekiel 1:4–28; Daniel 7:9–10; Revelation 4); and it may be located in the temple (Jeremiah 17:12), equated with Jerusalem (Jeremiah 3:17), or located in the heavens (Isaiah 66:1; Psalm 11:4). The vision of Isaiah seems to blend features of the Solomonic temple and the heavens as the throne room of God. The elevated position of the throne and [page 25] the exalted position of Yahweh suggest a height greater than the thirty-cubit ceiling of the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:2). The emphasis on height suggests the celestial

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

throne of God.

The “train” which filled the temple has frequently been identified as Yahweh’s “royal cloak,” which flows into the temple building. However, the reference may be to a “heavenly train” of clouds that fills the skies. In Psalm 68:4 God is identified as “him who rides upon the clouds,” and one of the attested meanings of the word “throne” in Semitic texts is “saddle.” The temple in Isaiah’s vision may well correspond to the temple of the psalmist who stated, “The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord’s throne is in heaven (Psalm 11:4) With his enthronement, the trail of clouds marks the presence of God in his celestial temple.

Isaiah 6:2—“Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings”

The seraphim were fiery figures who appeared as heavenly creatures in this vision of Isaiah only. The word “seraphim” is a Hebrew loanword into English, containing the meaning of the original Hebrew word “to burn” (*sārap*) and the Hebrew plural ending (*-im*). Elsewhere in the Old Testament the word “seraphim” refers to fiery serpents (Numbers 21:6) who are Yahweh’s agents of death, or flying fiery creatures which are at home with scorpions and vipers (Isaiah 14:29; 30:6). The latter earthly creatures are not to be equated with the heavenly figures in Isaiah’s vision.

All that is known of the heavenly seraphim is that they had six wings, only two of which were used for flying. The four other wings were used for covering the head and feet. But the Hebrew text is not clear as to whose head and feet are being covered. The wings could be covering the seraphim’s own bodies, but such modesty assumes that they were anthropo-

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

morphic creatures more than fiery figures. In view of the psalmist's words in Psalm 104:1–2,

Thou art clothed with honor and majesty,
who coverest thyself with light
as with a garment,

the wings of the seraphim may be the light which covers God “from head to foot.” The same motif is employed by the writer of Psalm 97:3:

Fire goes before him
His lightnings lighten the world;
the earth sees and trembles.

Thus, the seraphim are to be associated with the light and fire that surrounds Yahweh in his heavenly temple. They do not hide themselves from God; rather, they hide God from the full view of others.

By contrast, the cherubim are the two-winged creatures having human faces and animal bodies; they support the throne of Yahweh,¹ as stated in Isaiah 37:16: “O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim, thou art the God, thou alone.” The same function of the cherubim is attested to in Psalms 80:1 and 99:1. This function reflects the tradition of Exodus 25:18–20, which tells of the construction of gold cherubim that were to be set over the ark

1. T. H. Gaster, “Angels,” *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by G. A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 131–132. The cherubim were not babylike creatures as depicted in so much Christian art. They were more like winged sphinxes; see James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), figures 90, 126, 163, 165.

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

of the covenant. The usual setting of the cherubim is the earthly temple of God, although in Psalm 18:10 the cherub is the vehicle by which God flew through the heavens on the wings of the wind. Isaiah's vision probably contained most of these elements from the psalmist's repertoire: flying cherubim, flying seraphim ("fire and flame thy ministers" [Psalm 104:4]), and the trail of clouds ("who makest the clouds thy chariot" [Psalm 104:3]).

Isaiah 6:3—"HoLy, hoLy, hoLy is the Lord of hosts"

Perhaps the easiest way to pinpoint the meaning of the word "holy" is to use antonyms rather than synonyms. The opposite meaning of "holy" is that which is common, ordinary, and natural. Everything in the created order is natural, common, and ordinary. Therefore the Creator alone is holy. The two basic categories of all that exists are: (1) Creator and (2) creation. Creation is natural; God alone is "holy." In the strictest sense creation is natural and Yahweh is uniquely supernatural. "Holy" is the term that speaks of the Creator's position outside of creation. Things in creation may be referred to as being "holy" only in a secondary way. Such holiness is derived from the Holy One. The holiness of Israel and of all sacred items was derived from the Holy One of Israel: "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (see Leviticus 11:44–45).

The Holy One who stands as Creator over creation is identified by Isaiah by the traditional name and title *Yahweh Sebaoth*, or "Lord of hosts." In the light of 1 Samuel 17:45, the term "hosts" could refer to the military forces of ancient Israel. But the commentary provided by the psalmists suggests that the term applies to the heavenly hosts:

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?

Who among the heavenly beings

[literally, “sons of gods”] is like the Lord,

a God feared in the council of the holy ones . . .

O Lord God of hosts,

who is mighty as thou art, O Lord

with thy faithfulness round about thee?

Psalm 89:6-8

and

all gods bow down before him

For thou, O Lord, art most high over all the earth;

thou art exalted far above all gods.

Psalm 97:7–9

At one time these words were literally believed by many Israelites. But when polytheism and henotheism were rejected as true theology (as in Psalm 82, where the Lord pronounces his solemn sentence of death [vv. 6–7] and establishes justice), the name “Lord of hosts” survived as a literary motif to express God’s unique superiority. Thus, Yahweh, the holy Creator, is Lord of all creation, including the realities of the heavens.

Isaiah 6:3—“The whole earth is full of his glory.”

Isaiah and the writer of Psalm 104 shared a common theology, and that psalm (especially verses 5–31) provides an excellent commentary on what it means for the whole earth to be full of Yahweh’s glory. The passage is too long to be repeated here, but verse 31 provides the key:

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever,

may the Lord rejoice in his works.

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

In this poetic line with its synonymous parallelism, the psalmist has equated “glory” with “works,” the works of God in his creation mentioned in the preceding verses. The heavens declare the glory of God, and so does Mother Nature right here on earth! The earth is filled with the creative work of Yahweh; therefore, it is filled with the glory of God. The glory of God is not some ethereal quality in the abstract; rather, it is as concrete as the earth itself and as manifold as the wonders of nature. Isaiah’s vision of God reflects his appreciation of this good earth.

Isaiah 6:4—“And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called”

This verse combines the details of the Jerusalem temple filled with incense and the earth at large filled with smoke. Isaiah again uses ideas that appear in the psalms. In Psalm 104:32 the psalmist affirmed that when God looked on the earth, the earth trembled, and when he touched the mountains, they became filled with smoke. In Psalm 46:6 it is stated: “. . . he utters his voice, the earth melts.” In light of these statements it seems certain that Isaiah envisions more than the precincts of Solomon’s temple. He had a vision which unfolded all of heaven and earth responding to the Holy One of Israel. Fire, smoke, clouds, and earthquake were a part of Isaiah’s vision experience, as much as they were a part of Moses’ Sinai-Horeb experience (Exodus 19:18).

The “voice of him who called” in Isaiah 6:4 is commonly identified with the voices of the seraphim calling to one another. But the voice could be that of Yahweh, which is explicitly mentioned in verse 8, “I heard the voice of the Lord.” When God speaks, the earth trembles.

BAPTIST LEADER, AUGUST 12, 1979, Pages 24–26

The use of the word “house” in this verse need not restrict the dimensions of Isaiah’s vision to the temple in Zion, which is often called the “house” of God. The word “house” can also refer to the whole earth, just as the word “throne” can refer to the entire heavens. This is illustrated by the words of Psalm 36:8: “They feast on the abundance of thy house,” meaning that men are sated by the richness of God’s good earth.

Isaiah 6:5—“Woe is me! For I am lost . . . , for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.”

These several phrases are not joined directly together in the Hebrew text nor in English translations. Nevertheless, they belong together. Isaiah’s vision of God was so real that even though he could only see the seraphim covering the Holy One of Israel from “head to toe,” he knew that he had indeed seen Yahweh.

But Isaiah was equally aware of the tradition recorded in Exodus 33:20: “You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.” (See also Judges 13:22 and Deuteronomy 18:16.) Therefore Isaiah knew that he was lost—he was prepared to die.

But instead of a visit from the angel of death, Isaiah was greeted with forgiveness (literally, “atonement”) and assured of a purified life by one of the seraphim. The fiery figure purified by fire the lips of Isaiah. The impure lips of Isaiah and his people were probably a reference to the insincerity on the part of the citizens of Judah in their failure to live by the covenant of Yahweh to which they annually pledged their allegiance. Their religious vows were profane and meaningless.

Applying the Lesson to Life

One way to apply this lesson would be to sit and wait for a vision like the one Isaiah had. It would be a safe thing to do because we could probably wait for a long time, doing nothing, but always having a good excuse—“We are waiting for a vision!”

Since God has made himself known in the incarnation, he is not likely to use visions. Since God has given us a holy Scripture which we can literally see with our eyes, he is less likely to use the “mind’s eye” to communicate with us. Since we have both the living Word and the written Word, we have been given something better than Isaiah’s vision. We need not apply this lesson by waiting for something more; rather, we need to respond like Isaiah, “Here I am! Send me!” and use what we already have. It is Isaiah’s response, not his vision, which needs to be applied to life today.

Too many Christians are willing to disagree with Isaiah and to abandon this good earth to the devils and demons of this world. While praying the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come . . . on earth,” they tend to reject the earth and long for heaven. But both heaven and earth declare the glories of God! When we cannot find God’s glory on earth—in spite of human sin—it may say more about our vision than it does about God’s glory.

This lesson was well applied by Maltbie D. Babcock, who composed the hymn “This Is My Father’s World.” The hymn writer, psalmists, and the prophet Isaiah have made it possible for us to appreciate and appropriate the good news that this is the Creator’s world—which he made, which he loves, and which he has redeemed.