

Isaiah 6: Sense and Insensibility

Polar Extremes

I got a letter from my optometrist recently reminding me I need to get my eyes checked. Isaiah 6 reminds you to get your sight and your hearing checked. Do you see the glory of God? Do you hear his voice? Are you spiritually clean and healthy?

This magnificent chapter moves from one polar extreme to the other. It begins with Isaiah seeing, hearing, understanding and being healed. The chapter ends with people unseeing, unhearing, incapable of understanding and unhealed. The chapter begins with language of fullness, a vision of God as such a great and honoured king that even the end of his robe *fills* his palace or temple; with a vision of the whole earth being *full* of the kingly glory of the Lord. The chapter ends with a picture of emptiness, of *uninhabited* cities, *deserted* houses, an utterly *forsaken* land, with nothing left except for "the holy seed". The chapter begins with a vision of the Lord high and exalted. It ends with idolatrous objects, the terebinth and the oak, being cut down.

This vision occurs in the year King Uzziah died - around 740 BC. From 1:1 we know Isaiah will also prophesy during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. How do things stand after phase one? Under the leadership of good kings like Uzziah, Jotham and Hezekiah, is there hope that God's people might be reformed and revitalized?

God is Awesome!

Isaiah's vision begins with the temple. Isaiah 2 also begins with an exalted temple but then denounces the idolatry of God's people. There the Lord rises to bring low people's arrogance. So it's ominous to see the Lord "high and lifted up", especially when he's seated on his throne, for normally the Lord *sits* on his throne to execute judgment. When Isaiah tells us that "the whole earth is full of his glory" don't go thinking about beautiful sunsets and flowers and cute little birdies going tweet, tweet, tweet. No! In Isaiah 2 where the Lord judges the whole earth. Isaiah is telling us that the whole world of humanity is in the presence of the Judge of the whole earth.

A fireman was walking down a street and saw a little boy sitting in a little red wagon with little ladders hanging off the side and a lead around the legs of his pet dog. The fireman could see that if the boy started pedaling his wagon then the poor dog would be painfully dragged along the ground. The fireman stopped and said, "That's a great fire engine! But it will go much better if you put the lead on the dog's collar, not round his legs." The boy answered, "But then I won't have a siren!"

A loud siren is going off in Isaiah's head. He sees a temple filled with smoke and "where there's smoke there's fire." In the holiest part of the temple over the box containing the 10 commandments the Lord's throne sat between carved winged creatures, probably lions, called the cherubim. Many think the seraphim looked like winged serpents because this word usually refers to snakes. But *seraphim* literally means "the burning ones". This is how Isaiah sees the cherubim, the glorious angels in God's presence. To be in God's presence is to be on fire for the Lord!

These glorious, blazing angelic beings had six wings. This is a visionary experience, not

a photographic snapshot. The wings are symbolic. They covered their faces with two wings, their feet with two wings and flew with the other two. Alexander MacLaren suitably speaks of the seraphim possessing "wings of reverence, wings of humility, and wings of service." They hide their faces because, glorious as they are, they cannot look upon the glory of God himself. They hide their feet because in the ancient world the feet are lowly body parts. The seraphim did not have smelly feet but, symbolically, they cover their feet by way of underlining their lowly status compared to God. The symbolism of flying is that here are creatures ready to do God's bidding.

Isaiah hears these glorious angelic attendants voicing their awe of God: "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" It's over-reaching to see the threefold "holy" as implying God is three persons. We use italics, boldtype, underlining, asterisks to emphasise something. The Bible uses repetition. The threefold "holy" tells us that God's holiness is of immense importance. God's holiness includes his moral purity, but the central idea is that God is "totally other", that there is no one like him in the entire universe.

Chapter 6 echoes Chapter 2. Isaiah 2 is about God's temple being established as chief among the mountains. That meant all other temples and all other gods will pale into insignificance. Chapter 2 is about God being exalted and all idols being destroyed. In Chapter 6 Isaiah sees God high and lifted up and is reminded that God is supremely holy. This means there is no other god that can compare with his God. Chapter 2 spoke of God rising to shake the earth as he judges people for their idolatry. In Chapter 6 the seraphim have only to say that God is not to be compared with any other god for the doorposts and thresholds of the temple to shake, because this is the God who shakes the earth. Isaiah sees the whole temple now full of smoke, symbolizing again that the fire of God's wrath against idolatry is really blazing or, as we would say, "smoking."

Have You Got Hot Lips?

Isaiah responds with words that indicate to some he owned a horse: "Woe is me". This is the time to rein in our tendency to read things into the text. We may doubt Isaiah actually had a horse called "Isme". But did you notice that the previous chapter has already involved six woes against God's people? This then is the seventh woe.

"*I am ruined*", Isaiah says, because "*I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.*" He has heard and seen glorious angels worshipping God in profound reverence, covering their faces and feet. In Chapter 1 God rejects the worship of his people. They are unclean because of the lousy way they treat each other. But their lips are also unclean because they use the same mouths to worship idols. Isaiah realizes his lips also are unclean, that he is not fit to worship God.

A marvelous thing happens. A "burning one" flies to Isaiah with a live coal from the altar of incense. The whole vision is about fire which often destroys. But 4:4 promises, "*The LORD will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire.*" A cleansing fire applied to Isaiah's lips purges away his unclean worship, making him fit to worship God and tell others of God's greatness. So he is told, "*See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.*" We too need to be made fit to be in God's presence. Not fire but the blood of Christ has made this a reality.

How to Render People Insensible

Before Isaiah's sin was dealt with he heard the voices of the glorious angels. Now that his sin has been dealt with he hears the voice of God himself. There is now direct communication between God and his servant. The Lord asks, "*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*" Before Isaiah's cleansing there was only one answer to this question - an angel. But now Isaiah has been admitted to the heavenly court. Isaiah has seen the glorious angels flying, ready to do God's bidding. He is prepared, like them, to be God's servant and so he replies with the words an ancient slave would use in responding to the summons of his or her master, "Here I am. Send me."

Isaiah has **heard** the King's voice. He understands who he is in relationship to the King. He has **seen** the glory of the King. He has perceived his own need of forgiveness and cleansing. But now he is told to deliver a message of implacable judgment, for God says to him: "*Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'*"

Isaiah has just **heard** and understood what God himself had to say. Now when people hear what Isaiah is saying they are actually hearing what God himself is saying, but they are rendered incapable of realizing this. When a messenger from God faithfully communicates his words to others this is as good as being in the presence of the God of glory himself with all his burning ones around him. So you and I had better be jolly careful about how we respond to God's word when we hear it, hadn't we?

Isaiah has **seen** the glory of God in his vision and perceived who God is and what he himself is like. As Isaiah exercises his ministry among God's people they will see prophecies fulfilled. In Isaiah 7 God offers King Ahaz a sign. He doesn't want to see it. God gives him one anyway. God shows his people through the fulfillment of his promises that he is indeed their King, but despite all these manifestations of God's glory these people never see God and themselves as they really are.

What else in the Bible cannot hear and cannot see? Yes, idols. Look at Psalm 135:15-18: "*The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*"

Isaiah's vision of God "high and exalted" recalls Isaiah 2 - God poised to judge humanity for its idolatry. To call God "holy" is to reject all other gods. To call the Israelites "a people of unclean lips" implies they are idolatrous. God's judgment on his people is poetic: They too will hear but never understand; they too will see but never perceive. "*Those who make them will be like them.*"

In Nikko, Japan there is a 17th century temple shrine with a carving of the "Three wise monkeys". One covers his eyes, another his ears and the third his mouth. The moral is: If you keep yourself from seeing, hearing evil and speaking about it then you will keep yourself pure from evil. The Israelites were doing the opposite. When they saw

prophetic words fulfilled they covered their eyes so as not to see the Lord's glory. When they heard God's word they covered their ears so as not to hear God's voice.

You have heard the saying, "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil." Turn a blind eye. Close your ears. Keep your mouth shut. In other words, don't get involved, keep out of it. Don't treat God and his Word like this. Don't turn a blind eye. Don't close your ears. Let him show you his glory and cleanse and heal you.

Matthew 13:10 informs us, "*The disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?' He responded (v13): 'This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving' "*, etc. Jesus was a master communicator who used familiar examples and anecdotes to teach his disciples. But Jesus knew he was speaking to hard-hearted people. He'd say, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Jesus designed his parables so that truth would be revealed only to those who wanted to understand. Jonathan Swift remarked, "There's none so blind as they that won't see." Do you want to see? Do you want to hear?

John 12:37 tells how people would not believe in Jesus despite all the miraculous signs he performed. John then explains why they could not believe (v39), namely, as Isaiah had explained: "*He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn - and I would heal them.*" God in judgment had blinded their eyes to prevent them from seeing who Jesus really is. John adds, "*Isaiah said this because he had seen Jesus' glory and spoke about him*" (v41). The particular manifestation of God in Isaiah 6 was not a revelation of Jesus *rather than* of the Father. No! When Isaiah saw God as King high and lifted up in the temple he was seeing Jesus because Jesus is God and there is but one God.

The great poet Alfred Lord Tennyson asked,
 "For what are men better than sheep or goats
 That nourish a blind life within the brain,
 If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
 For so the whole round earth is every way
 Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

You and I know God. We know Jesus. Will you devote yourself to pray for those who do not know him? If we don't then are we any better than sheep or goats? Are we not merely nourishing a blind life within the brain?

Isaiah 35:5-6 looks ahead to a great day: "*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.*" Jesus healed the blind and the deaf and the lame and the dumb not merely out of compassion. He was showing us how every sense comes alive when people acknowledge him as our king, our Lord. Our message is about Jesus Christ our Lord. As we communicate this message to others miracles will take place. People's eyes will be opened to see God's kingly glory in Christ. Their ears will be opened to hear angelic voices worshipping God and to hear God's voice.

Erasmus said, "*In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king.*" Isaiah saw God's glory with two eyes and when the Lord asked, "Whom shall I send?" he responded "Here I am send me." You and I may not see God's glory with pristine clarity, but we do see his glory in our Lord Jesus Christ even if it is with half vision. The Lord still asks whom he will send to communicate to the blind and the deaf. What is your response, my response? "Here I am send me."