

Isaiah 6:1–13 — The Vision of the Holy Throne

Uzziah's Fall, Isaiah's Cleansing, and the Commission to Speak

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 6:1–13

“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.

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 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.”

Uzziah's Fall and the Altar of Incense

King Uzziah did that which was right in the sight of the Lord for most of his reign, but in the end his heart was lifted up to his destruction. He went into the temple to burn incense upon the altar of incense — a thing that appertained not to him. The priests, the sons of Aaron, who were consecrated to burn incense, withstood him at the door: “It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord; go out of the sanctuary.” He became a leper for the rest of his days (2 Chronicles 26:16–20). This does not necessarily speak to his eternal standing, but the act of pride brought swift governmental judgment.

What makes this background so striking in connection with Isaiah 6 is found in verse 6. Of all the things that could appear in this vision, there is a live coal taken with tongs from off the altar — the altar of incense, which is the altar associated with tongs. Uzziah presumed to burn incense there, and was struck with leprosy. Isaiah, in humility, confesses his unclean lips, and a coal from that very altar is brought to cleanse him. On this connection the whole chapter seems to hang.

The Throne: High and Lifted Up

In the year that a king of David's line failed — struck down by the judgment of God — Isaiah sees the one who will never fail: the Lord Himself, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. The name used in verse 1 is Adonai (sovereign Lord); in verse 5 Isaiah says his eyes have seen Jehovah. These are not two different persons. John 12:41 makes it plain that what Isaiah saw was the glory of Christ. Adonai is Jehovah; the Son is Jehovah; there is one God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The throne is elevated, but what lies beneath it is not explained here. From Ezekiel 1 we understand that the cherubim with their awesome wheels undergird the throne as its moral support, while the seraphim stand above it. Both speak of character belonging to God's throne: the cherubim with their four wings are connected with judgment, while the seraphim with their six wings speak of purification and mercy. Mercy, having two more wings, moves more swiftly than judgment.

Seraphim: Burners That Fly

J.N. Darby, in his *Collected Writings* (Volume 3), explains the word seraphim to mean “burners that fly.” Burning has at least two aspects: consuming and purifying. In this chapter we have the aspect of purification — the live coal that touches Isaiah's lips and removes iniquity. Elsewhere, the burning aspect appears in connection with judicial wrath.

The seraphim stood above the throne. Though they were above it, they covered their feet with two wings so that they would not appear to stand over the throne. They covered their faces as well. Both convey the most profound reverence in the presence of God — face not seen, feet not seen. Only two wings were left for flight, for service. Everything about them is determined by their association with the throne upon which Jehovah sits.

This is a word for us. We have the privilege of entering before the throne of mercy in our private prayers, and in assembly we are told to enter the holiest. There is a propriety belonging to that drawing near — something of covering the face and covering the feet, figuratively speaking. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Paul writes in Romans 13:14, “Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ.” This is the right answer for showing respect: that the eye of God, looking in our direction, would see not us, but the excellencies of Christ.

Holy, Holy, Holy: The Threefold Expression

One seraph cried unto another: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.” In Scripture, the word is duplicated in a number of places for special emphasis. The Lord would say “Verily, verily” often. But there are very few places where a single word is repeated three times. “Holy, holy, holy” is one of them. Three is the number of resurrection and full manifestation — which is why we need a Trinity to fully manifest God.

The house was filled with smoke. When the glory cloud came down upon Solomon’s temple, the priests could not stand to minister. There is a thought here of filling — where God dwells, He fills. His train fills the temple. His glory fills the earth. And the day is coming when He will fill us so full that there is room for nothing but Himself.

Woe Is Me: Self-Judgment Before God

In chapters 1 through 5 there are six woes pronounced — each time, “woe unto them,” plural, outward. Here in chapter 6 is the seventh woe, but it is entirely personal: “Woe is me, for I am undone.” That is the place of blessing. To take one’s place before the Lord in honest self-judgment. Isaiah sees the holy throne and says: I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

Job said the same in his own way: “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” It is one thing to hear about the Lord. When the spiritual eye is opened, however, we see ourselves as we truly are. The self-righteous one becomes the self-abhorring one. J.N. Darby, it is said, on his deathbed, when those gathered around him spoke of all the reward that awaited him, replied simply: “I shall obtain mercy.” That is where we

will all find ourselves — nothing to boast of, unprofitable servants, obtaining mercy.

The Live Coal: Purification and Liberty to Speak

One of the seraphim flew to Isaiah having a live coal taken with tongs from off the altar of incense. He laid it upon Isaiah's mouth: "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." This is one of the very few passages in Scripture where sin is removed without blood. It is accomplished by burning — the undiluted execution of judgment consuming the uncleanness.

Notice what the coal does not do. It does not make Isaiah scream and refuse to carry the message. It does the opposite: it prepares him for it. He is brought into liberty. Having confessed the trouble with his lips, God by means of this live coal provides the remedy, and Isaiah immediately says, "Here am I; send me."

The high priest on the Day of Atonement would enter the holiest with a pan of burning coals filled with incense, so that a cloud of fragrance would rise between him and the presence of God. The moral excellencies of Christ rose between the priest and the eye of God. Paul writes of putting on Christ as the answer to all the corruption of the flesh (Romans 13:12–14). This is the same thought: that looking in our direction, the eye of God would see not us, but the excellencies of Christ before Him.

Adonai Is Jehovah

In verse 1, Isaiah sees Adonai. In verse 5, he says his eyes have seen Jehovah. In verse 8, it is the voice of the Lord — again Adonai — that speaks. The same one throughout. John 12:41 confirms: "These things said Isaiah, when he saw his glory, and spake of him," referring to the Lord Jesus Christ. So Isaiah, seeing Jehovah in chapter 6, saw the glory of Christ. Jesus is Jehovah.

Psalm 110:1 says, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand." Jehovah said to Adonai. Who sits at the right hand of Jehovah? The Son. And yet He is also Jehovah. This is a thing that is hard — perhaps impossible — to explain apart from the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons, yet one God, one Jehovah, one Adonai. "This is eternal life," said the Lord Jesus in John 17:3, "that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." Eternal life involves the knowledge of divine persons — not merely doctrine about them, but to know them personally.

The Commission and the Judicial Hardening

The commission itself is a solemn one. Isaiah is sent to speak to a people who will hear but not understand, see but not perceive. Their heart is to be made fat, their ears heavy, their eyes shut — lest

they convert and be healed. This is not a description of what will happen despite the preaching; it is what the preaching itself will accomplish as a judicial act of God upon a people who have persistently refused.

Isaiah asks: “Lord, how long?” The answer is until the land is utterly desolate, the cities wasted, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. And yet — verse 13 — even then a tenth shall return. The holy seed shall be the substance thereof. There is a remnant. There is mercy at the end.

This passage is quoted in the New Testament at least three times: in Matthew 13 in connection with the kingdom, in John 12 in connection with faith in His person, and in Acts 28 where the apostle Paul, arriving in Rome, quotes it as the great turning point in his testimony to the Jews. In Matthew, J.N. Darby renders verse 14 as “in them is filled up the prophecy,” rather than “fulfilled” — the rejection of Christ giving the prophecy its fullest expression.

The coal has touched the lips. The messenger is sent. The word will not return void.