

Isaiah 6–7 — Mercy Swifter Than Judgment

The Throne, the Living Coal, and the Introduction of the Virgin's Child

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 7:1–7

“And it came to pass in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up toward Jerusalem to war against it, but could not prevail against it.

And it was told the house of David, saying, Syria is confederate with Ephraim. And his heart was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind.

Then said the Lord unto Isaiah, Go forth now to meet Ahaz, thou and Shear-jashub thy son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field; and say unto him, Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be faint-hearted, for the two tails of these smoking firebrands, for the fierce anger of Rezin with Syria, and of the son of Remaliah.

Because Syria, Ephraim, and the son of Remaliah, have taken evil counsel against thee, saying, Let us go up against Judah, and vex it, and let us make a breach therein for us, and set a king in the midst of it, even the son of Tabeal.

Thus saith the Lord God, It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass.”

Further Reflections on the Throne (Isaiah 6)

Before proceeding into chapter 7, some further thoughts arising from our last meeting are worth setting down. The throne of chapter 6 is described as high and lifted up, with the seraphim standing above it. In Ezekiel 1, the throne is also very high; the great wheels lift themselves up, there is an expanse between them and the throne, and above that expanse the throne is set. In Isaiah 6, no cherubim are visible below the throne; in Ezekiel 1, no seraphim are visible above it. Yet both are present in the full picture of God's throne.

Proverbs 20:26 gives us the cherubic thought: “A wise king scattereth the wicked, and bringeth the wheel over them.” Proverbs 20:28 gives us the seraphic thought: “Mercy and truth preserve the king:

and his throne is upholden by mercy.” The wheels are connected with God’s governmental judgment; mercy and truth with the character that upholds His throne. In common speech we say the wheels of God’s government grind slowly but grind surely — perhaps something of that found its way into language from the vision of Ezekiel 1.

The Living Creatures in Revelation: Mercy and Judgment Coalesced

In Revelation 4, the four living creatures have six wings — seraphic in that regard — yet their four distinguishing features (lion, ox, man, eagle) are cherubic in character. They are symbols of God’s judicial power, and that power is invested in Christ. It seems that what is presented separately in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 coalesces in the living creatures of Revelation into one whole, preparatory to the introduction of the Lamb.

The four features of the living creatures correspond to the four Gospels: the lion to Matthew’s presentation of Christ as King; the ox to Mark’s servant; the man to Luke’s perfect Man; and the eagle to John’s revelation of the One from heaven. Early church teachers perceived this, and it has been widely recognized since. In the Lamb, the cherubic character of judgment and the seraphic character of mercy are perfectly united. He who is the Lamb of God carries all of this invested in Him.

The Altar of Incense and the Live Coal

In Isaiah 6:6, the seraph has a live coal in his hand, taken with tongs from off the altar. The altar that had tongs mentioned in connection with it in the tabernacle was the altar of incense. The purpose of tongs is so that one need not touch the live coal directly, because it is too hot to handle with the bare hand. So the seraph carries the coal by means of the tongs.

There is something here about consistency with what rises up to God and is acceptable to Him. There is that which ascends to God from the altar — the fragrance of incense, the excellency of Christ. And there is something that comes down from God through His messenger. That messenger must be a fit vessel, consistent with what is acceptable to God, not mixing something iniquitous with what comes forth from Him to man. What the prophet pronounces must come from clean lips, from purged lips, that it might be the true message of God.

The Lord Jesus Himself, when asked “Who art thou?” answered, “Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning” — altogether what He said. There was no gap between His words and His walk. With us there can be more or less distance between the two. This is not satisfactory to God, and He does not desire it.

Woe Is Me — Personal, Not Corporate

In chapters 1 through 5 there are six woes, each one corporate: “woe unto them.” The seventh woe, here in chapter 6, is the personal one: “Woe is me.” That is the place of blessing — to take one’s own place before the Lord. The nearer we draw to the greatness and glory of God, the more clearly we perceive our own nothingness and defilement. And the greater our apprehension of the work of Christ on the cross, the more we are diminished in our own opinion of ourselves. These two things go together in the soul.

Verse 10 shows what salvation really does: it opens ears, opens eyes, brings understanding in the heart, and we are converted and healed and receive all the blessing. Salvation is a wonderful thing. And verse 9 shows what judicial hardening does: the very opposite — ears that do not work, eyes that do not work, a heart that does not work. It is like what Paul speaks of in the New Testament when he writes of those whose conscience has been seared as with a hot iron. The faculty itself no longer functions.

Three Appearances of Isaiah 6:9–10 in the New Testament

This is one of the most frequently quoted passages from the Old Testament in the New. It appears in three distinct contexts, each marking a turning point:

In Matthew 13:14, the disciples ask why the Lord speaks in parables. He answers that in the people around Him the prophecy of Isaiah is filled up: hearing they hear and shall not understand, seeing they see and shall not perceive. Their rejection of the kingdom gives the prophecy its fullest expression.

In John 12:40, it is quoted in connection with faith in the person of Christ: “He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. These things said Isaiah, when he saw his glory, and spake of him.” The rejection here is of His person.

In Acts 28:26–27, Paul has finally arrived in Rome. He has expounded and testified the kingdom of God to the chief of the Jews. Some believed, some did not. Having spoken his last word to them, he quotes Isaiah 6 — the great turning point of his apostolic testimony, after which the prison epistles come forth.

Adonai Is Jehovah: Reflections on the Trinity

It has been suggested by some that there is a distinction to be drawn between the one seen in verse 1 (Adonai) and the one named in verse 5 (Jehovah) — as though these are two different persons. But there is nothing in the passage to support this. It is the same one throughout. The word Adonai means

sovereign Lord and brings out aspects of sovereignty; Jehovah conveys the eternal I AM. Both belong to Christ. As the Lord said in John 8, “Except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.”

In Genesis 1, Elohim (plural) created — and the verb “created” is singular. The Hebrew has three numbers: singular, dual, and plural (three or more). Elohim is plural. A single plural noun with a singular verb points to unity in plurality, which the light of the New Testament identifies as the Trinity. And in verse 8 of our chapter, it says “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” — not “whom shall we send,” but first “I” and then “us.” There is something here that suggests the persons in the Godhead.

Isaiah 53: The Answer for the Sinner

The live coal of Isaiah 6 is not, however, the ultimate answer for a sinful soul. The fires of purifying judgment are not the ground of forgiveness for the sinner. The answer for the sinner is Isaiah 53:

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed... Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin.” (Isaiah 53:5, 10)

There are two aspects to what Isaiah says in verse 5 of chapter 6. First: “I am a man of unclean lips.” Second: “I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” For the first, the answer is the live coal — the burning purification of the altar. For the second, the answer is found in what follows in the commission: a judicial blindness falls upon the whole people of unclean lips, and the land becomes utterly desolate. JND translates verse 12 as “that the solitude be great in the midst of the land.” The spirit of burning burns up the uncleanness entirely.

The Spirit of Burning and a People of Unclean Lips

Isaiah 4:4 brings the two threads together: “When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and shall have purged the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof, by the spirit of judgment, by the spirit of burning.” Chapter 5 has been largely the spirit of judgment. Chapter 6 is the spirit of burning. What that burning coal did to Isaiah’s lips — burning off the uncleanness — the spirit of burning will ultimately do to the whole people.

We live in a world very much like that which surrounded Isaiah. Men and women of unclean lips are everywhere. It can seem as though nothing happens to them in spite of their great uncleanness. But God has not yet done with all His dealings with men. Today is a day of grace. The execution of judgment awaits.

Peter speaks to this in 2 Peter 2:6–8: “And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: for that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds.” Lot is the case with which we may each, in our own measure, identify — finding ourselves in the midst of ungodly lips, of unlawful deeds, vexed from day to day. Yet God delivered Lot. And God knows how to deliver the godly.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and part of 9 have something to do with the introduction of the virgin’s child — Christ, coming into the world. The world was fit for nothing but judgment, and yet God displays Himself in grace and mercy because He is not only light but also love. He is just in justifying those who are of the faith of Jesus (Romans 3:26).

The holy seed shall be the substance thereof. God’s purpose will be accomplished.