

LESSON 6

Here I Am, Send Me

Who should I send? Who will go for us? I said: Here I am. Send me.

— Isaiah 6:8

Isaiah volunteers before he knows the job, and the job is to preach to people who won't listen until almost nothing is left, and to trust God to keep a stump alive.

WHERE WE ARE

About 740 BC, the same year and the same temple as Lesson 4. Isaiah has just been forgiven. Jotham reigns in Jerusalem, and in about five years his son Ahaz will take the throne. Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria is moving west. Samaria will fall in 722 BC, and Babylon will burn the temple in 586. The question this passage answers: what is a prophet sent to do when God already knows the people will refuse?

Introduction

WHEN WE LAST SAW ISAIAH, HE WAS ON HIS FEET. A coal had touched his lips; the seraph had said, *Removed*, and the man who thought he was finished was standing in the throne room, forgiven.

You'd be glad to stop there. In seven verses a sinner goes from undone to clean, and the next verse has him volunteering. The words *Here I am. Send me* have been preached as a call to missions for generations, and the sermon usually stops right there.

Keep reading, though, and the assignment is hard to take. God sends Isaiah to preach, and He tells him before he leaves that the preaching won't work. Worse, it will harden the people who hear it. When Isaiah asks how long this will last, the answer is until the cities are empty. The one line of hope in the whole passage is a stump.

That's the problem 6:8–13 poses. Why would God send a forgiven man with a message He knows will be refused? And what's the point of preaching when the outcome is already decided?

Here I Am (6:8)

Then I heard the voice of the Lord asking: Who should I send? Who will go for us? 6:8.

This is the first time in the vision that the Lord speaks. Up to now the seraphim have done the talking. When God finally says something, it's a question, and it isn't addressed to anyone by name.

The pronouns shift. *Who should I send? Who will go for us?* The Lord speaks as one, then as more than one. Readers have heard the *us* in different ways.³⁹ Some hear God speaking with His heavenly court around Him, the way Micaiah saw Him in 1 Kings 22:19–23. Others hear more. The New Testament

gives Christians reason to: John says the glory Isaiah saw belonged to Jesus, John 12:41, and Paul says it was the Holy Spirit who spoke the words that follow, Acts 28:25. Isaiah couldn't have explained all of that. He knew who was asking.

I said: Here I am. Send me. In Hebrew it's two words.⁴⁰ He doesn't know where he's going, what he'll say, how long it will take, or whether anyone will listen. Moses argued at the burning bush. Jeremiah said he was too young. Isaiah answers the question before he's heard the assignment.

That's what forgiveness did to him. A few minutes earlier he was crying woe over his own unclean lips. Now he's using those same lips to volunteer. He's been brought close so he can be sent out.

A Message That Hardens (6:9–10)

And he replied: Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive, 6:9.

Look at the name God uses for them. *These people.* In 1:3 He had said, *my people do not understand.* Now, in the same breath as *do not understand*, they're *these people*. God has put distance between Himself and them.

The commands are built to show a habit. The Hebrew doubles the verbs, so the sense is *go on hearing, go on seeing*.⁴¹ Judah will hear Isaiah for forty years and watch everything he does, and never get it.

Then the hardest verse in the passage. *Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed, 6:10.*

The Hebrew is more physical than the CSB. It says make their heart *fat*, their ears *heavy*, and their eyes *shut*. The verse runs mind, ears, eyes, then turns around and runs eyes, ears, mind.⁴² Every way in is shut, from both directions.

What did it mean to Isaiah? He wasn't sent to preach riddles. Later in the book his hearers make fun of him for talking to them like a schoolteacher with small children, 28:9–10. He was plain, and that was the trouble. A people who have refused God again and again aren't saved by more light. Every clear sermon they reject leaves them a little harder, until there comes a point they can't come back from. They can't see that point. God can.⁴³

So this is judgment, and it falls on people who had already chosen. Chapters 1–5 record that choice: worship God couldn't stand, a land full of silver and horses and idols, a vineyard that grew nothing but worthless grapes. God confirms it. The truth they turned away from becomes the thing that seals them in.⁴⁴

It won't take long to see it happen. In the next chapter Isaiah meets King Ahaz at the aqueduct and offers him any sign he wants. Ahaz won't ask.

Until When, Lord? (6:11–12)

Then I said, "Until when, Lord?" 6:11.

Isaiah doesn't argue. He asks how long, the same question the psalmists asked when Jerusalem lay in ruins, Psalms 74:10; 79:5.⁴⁵ He has just been told that his own people, the people of unclean lips he confessed along with himself, won't be healed. Of course he asks how long.

God answers with a picture of an empty country. *Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate, and the LORD drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land, 6:11–12.*

Isaiah's hearers would live to see the first of it. Assyria took Galilee and carried its people off in 733 and 732 BC, 2 Kings 15:29. Samaria fell in 722, and the northern kingdom was gone. In 701, Sennacherib came through Judah, took forty-six walled towns, and stopped only at the wall of Jerusalem. Isaiah was there for all of that. He wasn't there for the end. In 586, Babylon burned the temple where he had seen the Lord, and Judah went into exile.

Who drives the people out? *The LORD*. Assyria and Babylon have the armies, but the verse gives the verb to God. These were the curses Moses wrote into the covenant, Deuteronomy 28:63–64. Judah had been warned.

So how long does Isaiah have to preach to people who won't hear? Until God has done what He said.

The Stump (6:13)

Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again, 6:13.

Even the survivors aren't safe. A tenth is left, and the tenth goes back into the fire. For a moment it looks like nothing will be left at all. Then the last sentence. *Like the terebinth or the oak that leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump.*

A terebinth is a large, long-lived tree of that country, often mentioned alongside the oak. Cut either one down to the ground, and it can still send up a shoot. The trunk is gone. The life is in the root. That's Judah. The nation will be felled, and God calls what survives *the holy seed*.⁴⁶

The chapter opened with a dead king. It closes with a felled tree. Twice in chapter 6 death looked like the last word, once over Isaiah at the altar and once over the nation, and twice it wasn't.⁴⁷ The Holy One the seraphim sang about has a holy seed, and He keeps it.

Hold on to the stump. Isaiah comes back to it in chapter 11, where a shoot grows from the stump of Jesse.

Looking to Christ

Isaiah 6:9–10 is one of the Old Testament passages the New Testament quotes most often. Jesus quotes it to explain why He taught in parables, Matthew 13:14–15. John quotes it at the end of Jesus' public ministry. *Even though he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him*, John 12:37, and John gives Isaiah's words as the reason: *He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts*, 12:40. And Paul quotes it on the last page of Acts, in Rome, to Jewish leaders who had listened to him *from dawn to dusk* and gone away divided, Acts 28:23–27.

Three times the refusal Isaiah was warned about happens again, twice with Christ Himself standing there. And three times the story keeps going. In Matthew, Jesus turns to His disciples and tells them their eyes are blessed because they do see, 13:16. In John, many even among the rulers believe in Him, 12:42. In Acts, Paul's last recorded words in the book are these: *this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen*, 28:28.

The hardening is real, and its judgment. But it's never the end of what God is doing. There's always a stump.

Applying the Text

Answer before you see the whole assignment. Isaiah said *send me* before he knew where. Most of what God asks of you comes the same way: a class that needs a teacher, a neighbor who needs a ride, a family member who needs you for longer than you planned. Waiting for the full job description is usually a polite way to say no.

Judge your work by faithfulness. Isaiah preached for about forty years, and most of Judah never listened. If you've taught your children the truth and one of them has quit coming, or you've taught a class that seems to take nothing home, remember that God sent Isaiah knowing the answer. The results belong to God. The faithfulness belongs to you.

Be careful what you keep hearing and ignoring. Hardening doesn't happen in a day. It happens one sermon at a time, to people who were in the room. The writer of Hebrews tells Christians to encourage each other daily so that none of them is hardened by sin's deception, Hebrews 3:13. Is there a command you've heard so often it doesn't move you anymore?

Don't write off the stump. The congregation that's half the size it used to be, the family where only one person still believes, the life that looks cut to the ground. God called what was left of Judah a holy seed. He's never needed a forest to do what He said He'd do.

For Discussion

1. Isaiah volunteers in 6:8 before he hears the message he'll carry in 6:9–10. What in 6:1–7 explains why he answers so quickly?
2. Compare *my people* in 1:3 with *these people* in 6:9–10. What has changed in the way God speaks of Judah?

3. According to 6:10, what would happen if the people saw, heard, and understood? Why wouldn't God want that outcome for this generation?
4. Isaiah preached clearly, and his clarity hardened the people who refused it. How can plain truth make someone worse rather than better?
5. In your study for this lesson, you read John 12:37–41 and Acts 28:23–28. Who refused to hear in each passage, and what happened next? What does that pattern say about the stump of 6:13?
6. Is there something God has told you so many times that you don't really hear it anymore? What would it take for you to act on it this week?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 6: The Sign Ahaz Refused (Isaiah 7)

Isaiah's first assignment is a king. Two armies are marching on Jerusalem, Ahaz is inspecting the water supply, and God sends the prophet with a promise and offers any sign Ahaz wants, as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. Ahaz already has a plan, and it doesn't include God.

Before you come: read Isaiah 7 and 2 Kings 16:1–9. Write down what Ahaz does instead of asking for the sign and notice whose help he pays for.

³⁹ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 193. On 6:8 he sets the scene in the divine council, citing 1 Kings 22:19–23 as the closest parallel, and leans toward reading *us* as the Lord speaking with that council while noting that others take it as a plural of majesty or an intimation of the Trinity. Motyer, *Isaiah*, [[PAGE]], calls it a plural of consultation but observes that because the New Testament relates these verses to Jesus (John 12:41) and to the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25), the passage has room for the full revelation of the Trinity. Young, *Isaiah*, 1: [[PAGE]], and Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, [[PAGE]], both read it as an adumbration of the Trinity.

⁴⁰ Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 39. On 6:8 he notes that Isaiah's answer is two words in Hebrew, and cites Martin's summary of the chapter's movement: the *woe* of confession, the *lo* of cleansing, the *go* of commission.

⁴¹ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 194. On 6:9 he explains that each command pairs an imperative with an infinitive absolute, stressing continuing action, and on 6:10 that the verbs literally mean to make the heart fat, the ears heavy, and the eyes shut.

⁴² Motyer, *Isaiah*, 83. On 6:9–10 he observes that v. 9 names the outer faculties and the inner ones, and that v. 10 arranges heart, ears, and eyes in a rounded pattern that returns on itself, stressing total incapacity.

⁴³ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 84. On 6:9–10 he calls this "the preacher's dilemma": the resistant can only be changed by hearing truth, yet every rejection risks carrying them past a point of no return (cf. Hebrews 6:4–8) that they cannot see and God appoints. He takes 28:9–10 as evidence that Isaiah preached with great plainness, so that the opportunity which could have saved his hearers became their judgment.

⁴⁴ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 195, 199. On 6:10 he holds that the hardening falls on a people who had long refused God and for whom the time of repentance had largely passed, and he answers the charge that God is being unfair by pointing to their many earlier opportunities; he compares Romans 1:24, 28, where God "gave them over." He also notes that the Old Greek recasts the verse so that the people harden their own hearts and that 1QIsa^a softens it further, and judges both to be attempts to remove a difficulty the Hebrew means to leave in place. Young, *Isaiah*, 1: [[PAGE]], goes further and grounds the hardening in a decree of reprobation; the text itself locates the cause in the people's refusal recorded in chs. 1–5.

⁴⁵ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 196–97. On 6:11 he rejects the view that "Until when?" is an objection to the commission and reads it as a lament like Psalms 74:10 and 79:5; on 6:12 he ties the Lord's driving the people out to the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28:21, 63.

⁴⁶ Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 39, 41. On 6:11–13 he says Isaiah must preach until his predictions of devastation and deportation are fulfilled, finds in the tenth "one slight glimmer of hope," and reads the stump as the faithful remnant from which a new Israel would emerge. Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, [[PAGE]], defends the Hebrew text of 6:13 against Qumran and the Old Greek, which lacks the final clause, while calling the hope in the verse "a very small ray."

⁴⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 84–85. On 6:13 he notes that the felled tree answers the dead king of 6:1, so that the chapter twice lets death appear final and twice denies it the last word; he takes the holy seed as the guarantee that the line carrying the messianic promise will survive until the Messiah comes.