

LESSON 5

The Year That King Uzziah Died

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Armies; his glory fills the whole earth.

— Isaiah 6:3

In the year Judah buried its king, Isaiah sees the King who never leaves His throne, and the holiness that undoes him is the same holiness that sends fire from the altar to make him clean.

WHERE WE ARE

About 740 BC. Uzziah is dead after fifty-two years on the throne. He spent his last years in quarantine with a skin disease, shut out of the temple he had once forced his way into, while his son Jotham governed for him. Jotham now reigns alone. In Assyria, Tiglath-pileser III has been king about five years, and his armies are moving west. This passage answers the question: what happens when a sinful man stands before the holy God?

Introduction

WHEN WE LAST LEFT OFF, THE LIGHTS WERE OUT. The owner of the vineyard asked what more He could have done; the hand stayed raised, and a man looking toward the land saw nothing but darkness. Isaiah 5 never says what God will do next. Chapter 6 answers with a story about one man.

Isaiah has held this story back. Five chapters of his preaching come first: the courtroom, the two mountains, and the song with a trap in it, and only then does he tell you what happened to him in the year the king died.²⁹ The order is important. Before he pronounces one more woe on Judah, he wants you to know he once pronounced one on himself.

The passage is seven verses long. In it, Isaiah sees the Lord, hears the seraphim, comes undone, and is made clean by a coal he never asked for. Fire keeps turning up in it. Keep track of it as you read, and watch what it does when it finally reaches him.

A Dead King and a Living One (6:1)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple, 6:1.

Kings' reigns were the calendar in Judah. Events were dated by the fifth year of this king or the twelfth of that one. Isaiah dates this one by a funeral. Uzziah had won wars, built towers, dug cisterns, and ruled for fifty-two years, 2 Chronicles 26:3–15. Then *when he became strong, he grew arrogant, 26:16*. He walked into the sanctuary with a firepan to burn incense, and a skin disease broke out on his forehead while eighty priests watched. *He lived in quarantine with a serious skin disease and was excluded from access to the Lord's temple, 26:21*. Even at his burial people said it out loud: *He has a skin disease, 26:23*.

So Uzziah died the way he had lived his last years, unclean and on the outside. Isaiah had just finished preaching that the whole nation was headed in the same direction.³⁰ The throne in Jerusalem passes to a new man. The throne Isaiah sees has never changed hands.

He tells you almost nothing about the One seated there. No face, no form. Isaiah says where the Lord sat, how high, and how much room His robe took up, and stops. *No one has ever seen God*, John 1:18, and Isaiah doesn't claim to have seen more than God showed him.³¹ The hem of the robe alone fills the temple. There's no room left in the building for anyone else.

What did it mean to Isaiah's generation? The king they had leaned on for half a century was gone, Assyria was rising, and the Lord was exactly where He had always been. What does it mean now? The same thing.

Burning Ones (6:2–4)

Seraphim were standing above him; they each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew, 6:2.

Seraphim means "burning ones," and this is the only passage in the Bible that shows them to us. Fire was how God displayed His holiness at the bush and on Sinai, Exodus 3:2–5; 19:18, so the creatures nearest His throne look like living flame. Notice what they do with most of their wings. They hide. Two cover their faces, because even they don't stare at Him. Two cover their feet. Only two are left for flying.

Then they sing. *And one called to another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Armies; his glory fills the whole earth, 6:3.* Hebrew makes a superlative by repeating a word. Twice would have been emphatic. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is a quality of God stated three times.³² *Holy* means set apart, in a class by Himself, untouched by anything unclean, and it runs through everything else God is.

The second line deserves a slower read. Two chapters earlier, Isaiah said Judah's land was *full of silver and gold, full of horses, and full of worthless idols, 2:7–8*. The seraphim say what the whole earth is actually full of. His glory. Judah's inventory and heaven's don't match.

The foundations of the doorways shook at the sound of their voices, and the temple was filled with smoke, 6:4. A song shakes the building. Hold on to that verb. In the next chapter, when word comes that two armies have joined against Judah, *the heart of Ahaz and the hearts of his people trembled like trees of a forest shaking in the wind, 7:2*. It's the same Hebrew word.³³ Doorposts tremble before the holiness of God. A king trembles before Syria. The rest of Isaiah will keep asking which of those is worth trembling over.

Woe Is Me (6:5)

Then I said: Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Armies, 6:5.

In chapter 5, Isaiah said *woe* six times over land-grabbers, drunks, cynics, and crooked judges. Now he says it over himself.³⁴ Every Israelite knew God was holy. Isaiah stands before Him.

Ruined means cut off, finished. The seraphim have mouths full of praise, and Isaiah can't join them. His lips are unclean, and a prophet's lips are his only tool.

He doesn't stop with himself. *I live among a people of unclean lips.* He belongs to Judah, and he knows it.³⁵ Then he gives the reason he sees it now: *my eyes have seen the King.* Judah's king had just been buried. Isaiah has seen the real one. A man measured against his neighbors can feel fine about himself for years. Isaiah was likely as godly a man as Jerusalem had. One look at the throne, and he's the first to say he's finished.

A Coal from the Altar (6:6–7)

Isaiah does nothing next. He can't. *Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs, 6:6.*

Stand where Isaiah stood. A burning one is flying straight at you, carrying something so hot that even he uses tongs. In Israel's history, fire coming out from the Lord had often meant judgment, Leviticus 10:1–2; Numbers 11:1. Isaiah had every reason to think this was the end.

The coal came from the altar, though, and the altar was the place where God accepted a sacrifice in the sinner's place.³⁶ *He touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your iniquity is removed and your sin is atoned for, 6:7.* The seraph touches the very place Isaiah confessed. *Atoned for* comes from a Hebrew word for covering, the way a payment covers a debt. Isaiah's guilt is gone because something has paid for it.

And Isaiah contributes nothing. He brings no animal, makes no promise, and volunteers for nothing yet. Every movement in the scene runs from the throne toward him. God doesn't leave him guessing what the coal meant, either. He puts words to it: *removed, atoned for.*³⁷

Set this beside the king whose death dates the chapter. Uzziah went into the sanctuary with fire in his own hand, determined to come near God on his own terms, and came out unclean for life. Isaiah reached for nothing. The fire came to him from God's altar, and he was made clean.

What did it mean to Isaiah's hearers? A man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips could be forgiven, and if one could be, chapter 5 was not the last word.³⁸ What does it mean now? The holy God keeps the standard exactly where it was and provides the sacrifice Himself.

Looking to Christ

As John closes the account of Jesus' public ministry, he explains why so many who saw the signs still wouldn't believe, and he quotes Isaiah twice, 53:1 and 6:10. Then he adds a line a careful reader can't get past: *Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke about him, John 12:41.* The *him* is Jesus. The King on the high and lofty throne, the one the seraphim covered their faces before, is the one John had walked beside in Galilee.

Isaiah stood at a shaking threshold and waited for fire to be brought out to him. The Christian hears an invitation Isaiah never heard: *since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience,*

Hebrews 10:19, 22. The sacrifice on the altar has a name now. God's holiness is what it was in the year Uzziah died. What has changed is how close the forgiven may come.

Applying the Text

Look at the throne before you look at the news. Isaiah's year had a dead king, a sinful nation, and an empire on the move. Before God showed him anything else, He showed him the throne, occupied. Whatever you've lost this year, a parent, a job, a leader you trusted, the Lord hasn't left His seat.

Quit grading yourself on the curve. Isaiah had just pronounced six woes on other people, and he'd have passed any comparison with Jerusalem. When Peter saw who was in his boat, he said what Isaiah said: *Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!* Luke 5:8. If you feel better about yourself the longer you look at other people, you haven't been looking at God.

Pay attention to your mouth. Of everything he could have confessed, Isaiah named his lips. Speech is where most of us sin every day and notice it least: the sharp answer, the story passed along, the promise shaded to get out of something. Which of this week's conversations would you want covered?

Believe God when He says it's gone. The seraph said *removed*, and in the very next verse Isaiah is on his feet volunteering. Plenty of Christians keep hauling around sins God has already taken off them. If you've come to Him through Christ and confessed it, take Him at His word: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*, 1 John 1:9.

For Discussion

1. List everything Isaiah sees and hears in 6:1–4. What does he never describe? Why do you think he leaves it out?
2. Isaiah gives three reasons in 6:5 for saying *I am ruined*. What are they, and which one comes last?
3. Uzziah went into the sanctuary with fire in his hand and came out unclean. Isaiah received fire from the altar and was made clean. What made the difference?

4. The seraphim sing that the whole earth is full of God's glory, while Judah's land was full of silver, horses, and idols, 2:7–8. How can both be true at the same time? What would you say your own life is full of?

5. Isaiah said woe over six kinds of people before he said it over himself. When was the last time you said it about yourself instead of someone else? What sin do you find easiest to condemn in others and hardest to see in you?

6. Is there a sin you've confessed to God that you're still carrying as if He hadn't removed it? What would it look like to believe 6:7?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 5: Here I Am, Send Me (Isaiah 6:8–13)

For the first time in the vision the Lord speaks, and He asks a question. Isaiah volunteers before he's heard the job description. The job turns out to be preaching to people who won't listen, for as long as it takes the cities to empty.

Before you come: read Isaiah 6:8–13, then John 12:37–41 and Acts 28:23–28. Write down who refused to hear in each passage and what happened next.

²⁹ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 184. On 6:1–13 he reads the chapter as a recommissioning for a harder task under a new and unbelieving king rather than Isaiah's first call, since Isaiah was plainly preaching in Uzziah's reign in chapters 2–5 and the account resembles Micaiah's vision in 1 Kings 22:19–23 more than Jeremiah's call. Young, *Isaiah*, 1:232–233, takes the opposite view, that this was the original call, placed after chapters 1–5 so the reader meets the message before the messenger. Commentators divide here, and the lesson does not depend on settling it.

³⁰ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 78–79. On 6:1 he asks why Isaiah dates the vision by a death rather than by the fifty-second year of the reign, and answers that Uzziah died as he had lived, estranged and unclean, a picture of the nation Isaiah had just described in chapter 5; he also notes that the chapter is pervaded by death, from the dying king to the felled tree of 6:13, and that twice death turns out not to have the last word.

³¹ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 187. On 6:1 he observes that Isaiah says nothing about God's face and describes only where He was, what surrounded Him, and what was said, and he takes the vision as a limited manifestation of God adapted to what a human being could take in.

³² Motyer, *Isaiah*, 80–81. On 6:2–3 he notes that the seraphs, literally “Burning Ones,” appear only here, and that Hebrew repeats a word for a superlative (“gold gold” for pure gold in 2 Kings 25:15), but that this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where a quality is raised to the power of three, as if holiness were the whole truth about God.

³³ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:246. On 6:4 he points out that the verb for the shaking of the doorposts is the one Isaiah uses in 7:2 for the swaying of Ahaz's heart, so that the scene in the temple prepares the reader for the king who trembles before his enemies.

³⁴ Smith, James, *Major Prophets*, 39. On 6:5 he observes that before Isaiah pronounced woes on others he had first pronounced one on himself, and that having heard holy lips praise God, he became aware of the uncleanness of his own.

³⁵ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 192. On 6:5 he argues that the vision did not teach Isaiah anything new about God's holiness or kingship, which were long familiar ideas, but brought him face to face with them; and that in confessing the sin of his people along with his own, Isaiah shows himself less self-absorbed than ministry-absorbed.

³⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 82–83. On 6:6–7 he notes that fire in the Old Testament is not a cleansing agent but the active holiness of God against sin, and that this fire comes from the altar, where holiness was satisfied by a substitutionary sacrifice; atoned (kipper) carries the idea of a covering price, the way the right sum covers a debt.

³⁷ Young, *Isaiah*, 1:251. On 6:7 he argues that the seraph's words are necessary to the sign, since without them Isaiah could not have known what the coal meant, and that the forgiveness rests not on any power in the fire but on a sacrifice already offered.

³⁸ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 82. On 6:5 he suggests that Isaiah's including his people may be a marker for the future: if his own sin can be forgiven, so can theirs, and in his own atonement he may already have glimpsed the answer to the darkness of 5:30.