

Personal Preparation for a Life on Mission Isaiah 6:1-8

Pastor Kelly R. Randolph
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One of the potential dangers of ministry during the pandemic is distraction. This has certainly been one of the most challenging seasons of ministry in my life as a pastor. At times I have felt like a free-throw shooter facing the student section at Charles Koch arena. It is hard to focus on getting the ball in the basket amid all the noise and things waving in your face.

But the truth is the church has a mission. That mission is making disciples. Jesus gave crystal-clear instructions to his church in Matthew 28 and again in Acts 1. Make disciples of all the nations as you bear witness to Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Now there are thousand other things we can say about the implications of that mission. But the mission is clear. I believe it is important that we remind ourselves of this in the middle of our distractions.

For the next four or five weeks, we are going to focus on that mission. We are going to be talking about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ living on mission. Today, I want to talk to you about personal preparation for a life on mission.

Isaiah was a prophet in Judah in the 8th century BC. The scope and variety of his prophetic words are breathtaking. Commenting on the beauty and depth of Isaiah, OT scholar Ronald Youngblood stated that Isaiah is the “Grand Canyon” of the prophetic books. Isaiah’s prophetic proclamation was directed at both Judah and the surrounding pagan nations. He spoke both words of judgment and salvation. His writings include some of the most majestic descriptions of the majesty and sovereignty of God to be found anywhere in Scripture.

Today, we are going to look at the event that prepared Isaiah for his prophetic mission. What he describes in Isaiah 6 is a defining experience in his life that prepared him to answer God’s call and fulfill the mission God had given him. *A life on mission requires a proper sense of God that puts ourselves and our mission in proper perspective.*

I. Life on mission requires a proper sense of God (vv. 1-4).

A. Isaiah has a vision of God.

1. This vision occurs in the year of Uzziah’s death. Uzziah was king of Judah for 52 years. He had a long and stable reign. Judah was prosperous and things were good. The death of Uzziah represented uncertainty.
2. In this situation of change, Isaiah was confronted with a vision of the Lord. This vision lifted his focus from the death of an earthly king in Judah to the living God who reigns as King over the whole earth.
3. Isaiah saw the Lord. This is why I use the word “sense” of God. I am not talking about just a transfer of theological information. I am talking about a transforming experience of the reality of God. Of course, that begins with understanding some things about God. But a sense of God is something that takes hold of your whole life – mind, emotions, and will.

B. What are the features of Isaiah’s vision?

1. A sense of God’s majestic sovereignty.
 - a. God is seated on a throne, high and exalted. He is the majestic King.

- b. His royal robes fill the temple suggesting his greatness as King.
2. A sense of God's awesome holiness.
- a. The seraphim (burning ones) fly with faces and feet covered in the presence of God.
 - b. They call out to one another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.
 - 1) Repetition is used in Hebrew to indicate totality or to express superlatives. In other words, God is as holy as holy can be.
 - 2) What is this holiness?
 - a) It is God's separateness. Holy means separate. This means that God is incomparable and distinct. There is no one like Him. Isaiah 46:9 – I am God, there is none like me.
 - b) God is totally pure and separate from sin. There is no sin or imperfection in God. Hab. 1:13.

We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God's holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God's power and admire God's wisdom, but His holiness he cannot even imagine. (A.W. Tozer)

3. A sense of God's brilliant glory.
- a. The whole earth is full of his glory. The visible greatness of God is seen in his creation and his works. John Piper refers to glory as God's holy perfection gone public. In other words, glory is the visible display of God's incomparable purity and otherness.
 - b. The temple shakes at the voices of the seraphs and the whole place is filled with smoke. A cloud is often associated with the presence of God.

Is it any wonder that Isaiah's favorite designation for God is "the Holy One of Israel?" This is where the life on mission begins – with a true sense of God. Serious missional living will never be the result of a trivial view of God. Back in the 1950s, British pastor JB Phillips wrote a book to challenge inadequate views of God. It was called "Your God Is Too Small." What about you today? Is your God too small? Or have you been gripped with a sense of the Holy King revealed in the vision of Isaiah?

Your sense of God affects everything downstream. If your view of God is off, your understanding of yourself, those around you, the world, your family, your work, your mission – all of it will be adversely affected by a wrong sense of God. Will you let the Scriptures frame your understanding of God? Or will you shape God in an image that pleases you?

Now, let's see how this view of God begins to influence our lives.

II. A proper sense of God provides a proper perspective of ourselves (vv. 5-7).

A. Isaiah is gripped with a sense of his sin.

1. Isaiah is filled with dread. Woe is me! He feels that he is under a death sentence, under judgment. He is ruined by the sight of God's holiness.
2. This vision of God's holiness has brought into clear view his own sin. He is a man of unclean lips. His dirty lips are only expressions of a dirty heart. Calvin suggests that he focuses on his lips because of his prophetic role. If the very instrument he was to use (lips) in service to God was unclean, what could be said of the rest of his life?
3. His sense of dread is directly related to his vision of the King, the Lord of hosts. His view of God's utter holiness has exposed his utter sinfulness.

Perhaps you have seen a demonstration where UV lights are used to reveal stains on carpets, countertops, clothing, or even a person's hands. The light reveals stains that you are not aware of. When Isaiah found himself flooded by the light of God's holy glory, his sin became obvious. If your view of God does not have the effect of making you uncomfortable about sin, then your view of God is deficient.

B. Isaiah is gripped with a sense of grace.

1. Just when Isaiah thought his life was over, the grace of God intervened. One of the seraphim came to him with a coal from the altar and touched his lips. His sin was forgiven and his guilt removed.
 - a. The altar is the place of sacrifice for atonement or covering of sin. See Leviticus 17 for a detailed explanation of this.
 - b. Alec Motyer writes,

It holds together the ideas of the atonement, propitiation and satisfaction required by God and of the forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation needed by his people. All this is achieved through substitutionary sacrifice and brought to Isaiah, encapsulated in the single symbol of the live coal.

2. The utterly holy God whose brilliant holy glory reveals sin is also the utterly gracious God whose grace forgives sin and removes guilt.

This picture of the cleansing of sin through sacrifice finds its ultimate expression through Jesus Christ. The Bible says that Jesus is the sacrifice for sin that covers our debt and removes our guilt. Romans 3:24-25 tells us that God redeems us by his grace through giving Jesus Christ to be the sacrifice that turns away his wrath against our sin. Hebrews 10:11-14 tells us that sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was a one-time sacrifice that takes away sin for all who believe.

In John 12:41 after quoting Isaiah 6:10 in connection with the unbelief of the Jews toward Jesus, John says, "Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him." That is astounding. John says that Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus Christ in his vision. How appropriate that the convergence of holiness and grace experience by the ancient prophet finds its ultimate expression in the person of Jesus Christ.

Have you been forgiven of your sin? Have you recognized your sin in light of God's holiness and had that sense that you are ruined by it? Then confess your sin to God and be forgiven. He is gracious. He sent his Son Jesus Christ to suffer the judgment your sin deserves on the cross. Jesus then rose from the dead indicating the sufficiency of his sacrifice and his victory over sin. If you trust in Jesus, God will touch your life with his forgiving grace and your guilt will be removed.

What does this have to do with our mission? A person living on mission must view themselves as a forgiven sinner. Isaiah saw his sin in light of God's holiness. He confessed it. He then experienced the forgiving grace of God. The self-understanding that I am a forgiven sinner is essential to living on mission. God is holy and hates sin. Sin brings judgment. But God is also gracious and forgives sinners.

A proper sense of God will lead us to a proper sense of ourselves. But notice in vv. 8-13...

III. A proper sense of God provides a proper perspective of our mission (vv. 8-13).

A. Isaiah responds in obedient service to God's call.

1. Before he felt woe and dread in God's presence. He felt distant and wanted to withdraw from God.
2. Now forgiven, he hears God's voice and is ready to respond with obedience.
 - a. He hears God calling for someone to go and carry out his will.
 - b. Isaiah volunteers to go. Here I am, send me. His sense of the holiness of God, his own sin, and God's gracious forgiveness produced a heart of obedience to God's will.

*The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won't enlist you unless you are healthy and Jesus won't enlist you unless you are sick. What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help wanted ad. It is a help available ad. God is not looking for people to work for him but people who let him work mightily in and through them. (John Piper, *Brothers We Are Not Professionals* p. 39)*

B. God's commission to Isaiah is a difficult one.

1. He is sent to people who will largely reject his words and be hardened.
 - a. They will hear and see but they will not understand or perceive the truth in Isaiah's words. Instead, the message will make their hearts dull, their ears heavy, and their eyes blind.
 - b. Like Pharaoh in Exodus, they will be hardened by God's words. This is because they have hardened themselves against God and now God has determined to judge them. His word will agitate their rebellion and confirm them in their judgment.
2. How long must Isaiah carry out this difficult call?
 - a. Until the nation of Judah is destroyed and carried into captivity. It is a picture of military destruction and deportation to a foreign land. Note in v. 12 that it is the Lord who removes them to exile.
 - b. The destruction will be devastating. Yet, there is a ray of hope. Even the burned stump will contain the holy seed – a Messianic hope.

Of course our assignment is not exactly like Isaiah's. We are not prophets inspired by the Holy Spirit to deliver direct messages to Judah and the surrounding nations. But there are some aspects of his situation that we too will face.

- Our response to the call of God to live on mission is motivated by our experience as forgiven sinners. It is a response of gratitude and surrender.
- As we carry the message of the gospel to others, it is a message of salvation and judgment. Judgment awaits those who refuse God's grace and reject Jesus Christ. But salvation is the free gift of God to all who accept God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ.
- We know that the responses to this message will be mixed. Many will not believe. Others will. We are not accountable for the responses of people to the gospel. We are responsible for our obedience to the mission.
- God calls us to a life of mission until we die or Jesus returns. It is not a question of whether we are called to be on mission. To know Jesus is to be called to mission. It is a question of obedience to the mission.

Conclusion

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up... That changed everything for Isaiah. That view of God reoriented his life, his self-understanding, his mission. Maybe some of us here today need a storyline that says, "In the year of the Coronavirus, I saw the Lord high and lifted up..." I don't expect that vision of God to be a literal vision like that of Isaiah. But it can be a renewed vision of God drawn from the truth of Scripture that seizes your life and changes everything.

Will you allow God to prepare you for a life of mission by renewing your vision of him today? Will you ignore the distractions that cloud your field of vision and focus on who God is – majestic, holy, glorious? Will you then see yourself as you are – a forgiven sinner? Will you respond in gratitude by surrendering to a life lived on mission for the glory of God?