



## CLEANSSED AND COMMISSIONED

Isaiah 6

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Like a master storyteller, Isaiah chose to begin his great book not at the beginning, but with scenes from the end. In chapters 1-5, Isaiah surveyed the devastating consequences of apostasy among God's people. In chapter 6, Isaiah flashes back to where it all began for him—cleansing and commissioning before the Lord, the Holiest of All.

### WHO ME? CAUGHT HOARDING GOD'S BLESSINGS

In Isa 6:1, Isaiah dates his commissioning to the year that King Uzziah died. Uzziah reigned for more than fifty years as one of the most successful kings in Israel's history. All that he did prospered. We've heard in Isa 1-5 about the lavish material prosperity of Jerusalem—all because of the golden years of King Uzziah. But pride goes before a fall (Prov 16:18). Uzziah died in shame and isolation, exiled because of his presumption.

Presumption catches everyone off guard. One person presumes a greater measure of intimacy with another, which catches that second person off guard. Their surprise is itself surprising to the first person, leaving everyone feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable.

A few years back there was a fan of the actor Nicolas Cage, who presumed that he and Nick were the best of friends, even though they had never met. The man somehow got inside Nick's house late at night, helped himself to a popsicle, and then headed back to the master bedroom to try on some clothes—all while the Cage family was home asleep. When Nick and his wife awoke and found the man there, they were caught off guard. They weren't feeling the same degree of intimacy that their stalker felt for them. Likewise the stalker was shocked when Nick dialed 911...

King Uzziah's presumption was similar. At the height of his royal good fortune (as recorded in 2 Chronicles 26), Uzziah presumed that he and God were peers. Uzziah's grand palace was next door to the Temple atop Mt. Zion. One day, forty years into his reign, Uzziah went next door to God's house, carrying his own censer for incense. He walked through the outer courtyard, up the steps, and right into the Holy Place, where the beautiful, golden Altar of Incense stood in front of the Holy of Holies. The entrance to the Holy of Holies was blocked by a long curtain, embroidered with images of fiery angels (the "cherubim"). Every day, morning and evening, the Temple priests would bathe and put on special holy garments before making this same journey up to the golden Altar of Incense, where they would conclude morning or evening prayer with an offering of incense—symbolizing the prayers of God's people being lifted up to him. But on this day, King Uzziah walked in to the Holy Place. He was not consecrated as a priest. He did not take a special bath. He did not wear special clothes. He simply presumed his own holiness. So he walked right in, up the steps, and into the Holy Place, thinking that he would help himself to

some of the incense reserved for God. The high priest warned him against presumption, but Uzziah brushed him and all the other priests aside. Then Uzziah began to help himself to the coals from the altar. And that was when God struck Uzziah with “Old Testament leprosy,” which is different from the disease of the same name today. Old Testament leprosy was more akin to ebola than eczema. It was highly contagious. It was a slow, painful death. And it made people look like they were the walking dead.

Think of how shocked Uzziah must have been. When he entered the Temple, he had thought himself holy, holier even than the priests. He had envisioned himself being on par with God. If God and he were such good friends, why couldn't he have a popsicle, try on some clothes, and help himself to some coals from the altar? But God saw things differently, and he dialed 911. Uzziah left looking like a rotting corpse, the very antithesis of holiness, never allowed back in the temple. For the next decade, he lived in isolation while his son reigned in his place. Uzziah rotted from the outside in—until the leprosy finally consumed him.

Uzziah's rise and fall captures in miniature the story of Israel as a whole. Jerusalem's decline didn't occur during a time of adversity, but rather during the material prosperity following Uzziah's golden years. In their prosperity, the people forgot the Lord.<sup>1</sup> They presumed that God's blessings—good food and drink, security, wealth, honor and so on—were for them, period. In their prosperity, they forgot that God had blessed them so that they might be a blessing to the world. In their prosperity, they forgot how they were to take care of the widows and orphans, the downtrodden and the poor. In their prosperity, they forgot how they were also to be a light to the nations. Instead, they partied on the backs of the poor. Slowly, the light of God's glory flickered and faded from Jerusalem. After God's many, many calls for repentance, he finally dialed 911. God's people were shocked to find themselves exiled in Babylon, looking like the walking dead.

Jesus described<sup>2</sup> the final judgment as a time when all the peoples of the earth will be judged according to their allegiance to him, particularly in terms of what they did with his many blessings. Did they presume upon the Lord like the Israelites, presuming that his blessings were for them, period? Or did they become God's conduits, channels of his grace to those in need. Jesus says that he will receive into the kingdom those who cared *for him* by caring for others, whether they knew it or not. They will ask: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And Jesus will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” Meanwhile, he will say to the others, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” It's a sobering reminder for us: the Lord has blessed us richly so that we might be a blessing to others.

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<sup>1</sup> When the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deuteronomy 6:10-12 ESV)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:31-46.

The last ten years of King Uzziah's reign must have been a similarly sobering time in Jerusalem. The people were likely just as surprised as King Uzziah, asking "How could this have happened to us? We thought we were your friends, God. What widows and orphans are you talking about? When did we see you hungry or naked or sick or in prison?"<sup>3</sup>

When I was in college, two elders from my church came over to talk with me. I presumed they were coming over as my peers. Maybe there were some issues in the church that they needed my help with. Maybe they just wanted to hang out. But when we sat down to talk, I discovered that they had come to warn me—about me! I had a bad case of young man's disease, and they were concerned for me—and those in the wake of my pride and presumption. God had blessed me so that I might be a blessing to others, but I was living as if it was all just for me, period. So they called me to a posture of humility and graciousness toward others, especially the least of these. I'm ashamed to say it, but I just sat there in disbelief: "Who, me? Are you talking about me? I'm one of the good guys. How is this possible? How could you be talking about me?"

Here's the point: Up until now in our study of Isaiah, we've repeatedly heard God's condemnation of those wicked sinners in Jerusalem, those idol worshippers, those terrible oppressors of the poor, those braggarts and drunkards. God damn them for their hardheartedness! But the further we've read and the more we've wagged our fingers at the "bad guys," the more God's spotlight has reflected back on us. By the end of Isaiah 5 last week, I was totally caught off guard, "Who me? What materialism? What Epicureanism? You can't be serious, Lord? When did I see you hungry or naked or sick or in prison?"

How about you? Do you feel it too? If so—even just a little bit—then it's a good sign. God is calling us to listen to him. He's prying open our hearts so that we can hear the Gospel and respond properly. Instead of asking, "Who me?" we ought to be saying, "Woe is me!"—like Isaiah.

## **WOE IS ME! CONFESSION THAT LEADS TO CLEANSING**

Isaiah finally emerges as a character in his own story in 6:1. Surprisingly, he's not a one-dimensional holy hermit, fresh from the desert, blameless in Jerusalem's apostasy. Jewish tradition holds that Isaiah was part of the royal family, a much younger cousin of King Uzziah. Isaiah was probably in his late teens or early twenties when King Uzziah died. And like Uzziah and everyone else, Isaiah was evidently caught off guard by the Lord. He writes:

*"I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the hem of his robe filled the temple."* (6:1b)

If you haven't visited Jerusalem, you have probably seen photographs of the Temple Mount at the highest point in the old city. The Dome of the Rock that sits atop the Temple Mount is a large, impressive building visible for miles and miles, and it's roughly the same size as Solomon's Temple. What Isaiah saw in his vision was Almighty God seated on his throne, and the tiniest bit

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<sup>3</sup> Historians describe a similar sense of shock in Washington forty years ago in the wake of Viet Nam, Watergate, and the Nixon resignation. How could the "good guys" have fallen so low?

of fabric from his robe filled the largest building in Jerusalem. Can you imagine? God seated on a great throne towering miles above the Middle East's greatest architectural structure of the day?

But it isn't simply God's greatness that catches Isaiah off guard. It's also God's *holiness*. The holiness of God speaks of his complete other-ness even apart from sin. We see this in the description of the seraphs (v 2), the fiery angels pictured on the curtains of the Holy of Holies. The seraphs are sinless, yet four of their six wings are used to hide themselves from God as they sing. If the angels are without sin, why must they cover themselves in this way? Because God is holy. He is completely different, even from the seraphs. They are creatures, but he is the Creator. Like rockets flying near the sun, they must cover themselves lest they be consumed.<sup>4</sup>

We also hear of God's holiness in the seraph's song (v 3). In English we use comparative and superlative adjectives to make quality distinctions. "Walking is *risky*, biking is *riskier*, but riding metro is the *riskiest* of all," etc. But in biblical Hebrew, instead of using a comparative adjective, the word is said twice: e.g., biking is risky risky. And instead of superlatives, Hebrew will say the adjective three times: e.g., metro is risky risky risky. So take note of what the holy seraphs are singing in v 3. The sinless seraphs are certainly holier than we are. But their holiness pales in comparison with the Lord. He is superlatively holy. A better English translation of v 3 would be, "The Lord of Hosts is Holiest of All. The whole earth is full of his glory."

Isaiah heard them singing. He saw the Lord high and lifted up. He felt the foundations of the thresholds shake with the angels' song. He smelled the smoke that filled the temple. And all at once he too was caught completely off guard. Yet Isaiah was different from his cousin. Remember when the high priest stopped King Uzziah, saying "Don't presume upon the Lord"? King Uzziah responded, "Who me? What are you talking about? I'm one of the good guys," and then he took coals from God's altar. Isaiah, however, humbled himself before the Lord. Listen to his confession in 6:5. Not, "Who me?" but "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

Before the Holiest of All, Isaiah did the most sensible thing he could do. He humbled himself, acknowledging that he was no more holy than anyone else in Jerusalem. And yet there *was* something different about him: humility. What separated Isaiah's unclean lips from the King and many others is what he said with his lips. Isaiah cried, "Woe is me!" Meanwhile, most of the others continued saying, "Who me? When did I see you hungry or naked or sick or in prison?" Isaiah's confession made all the difference.

King Uzziah, presuming himself holy, stole from God's holy altar. He flew too close to the sun without any covering. God's holiness burned him, and he was marked with leprosy as a visible sign of his uncleanness. Isaiah, on the other hand, confessed his uncleanness before God, and look what happened:

*Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:6-7 ESV)*

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<sup>4</sup> Watch the Bible Project's excellent video on holiness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19vn5UvsHvM>.

One of the burning seraphs brought out a burning coal from the altar of incense, the symbolic transmission point for the prayers of the people, the center of all holy speech in the service of God. The angel brought it to Isaiah's lips, to the focus of Isaiah's confession. And then the angel said, "Behold, the coal has touched your lips. Your guilt is removed." Your sin is *kippered* (as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement). "Your sin is *covered*." Isaiah was given protection, a covering, so that he could fly near to the Holiest of All without being consumed by God's holiness. ***What King Uzziah in his presumption tried to steal, Isaiah was given in his humility.***

Isaiah's vision was extraordinary, but his experience of God's cleansing entirely ordinary. God loves to rescue those who humble themselves before him. This is his call to all of us this evening. We've all been caught red-handed, hoarding God's blessings, asking, "Who me?" But God has been at work on our hard hearts, prying them open, so that by his grace we might say instead, "Woe is me."

When we confess our sins to God and cry out for his mercy, he always hears us, and he always grants us his covering. The blood of Jesus is our *kippur*, our covering, which enables us to draw near to God in all his awesome holiness. St. John says, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:8-9 ESV) Just like Isaiah, by confessing our sins we can be forgiven and cleansed and covered by the Lord.

## **SEND ME! COMMISSIONED BY THE LORD**

What happened next suggests that there are two sides to hard-heartedness. There is another, more subtle way we can resist the Lord. God has cleanses us so that he might use us. Whenever we refuse to follow, it's simply another kind of hard-heartedness, no better than presumption.

When we repent of our sins, we're not only confessing what we've done wrong, but also renewing our commitment to *obey* him. For example, when we confess that we have forgotten the Lord in our prosperity, we're at the same time asking for his help to share his blessings with our neighbors. We might say, "Lord, you have blessed us so much, yet we have hoarded it for ourselves. We're truly sorry and we humbly repent. Now help us become conduits of your generosity for the least of these and for the nations." Having made such a confession, it's time to act on it, to follow the Lord as he calls.

As soon as Isaiah was cleansed, God asked (v 8): "Whom shall I send?" It's a depressing question, really, since all the people of Jerusalem were supposed to be God's ambassadors. But sadly, in Isaiah's vision, only his lips had been cleansed. He was the only one who was able to draw near to the Lord and answer him. And Isaiah said, "Here I am! Send me!"

Just as Isaiah modeled for us in v 5 a proper humility before the Lord, in v 8 he modeled a proper confidence. He could have responded differently. Instead of saying, "Send me," he could have

said, “Not me!” Even though God cleansed him, he could have wallowed in false humility, asking, “How could I possibly be of use to God? I’m not worthy.” Or, knowing the challenges that lay ahead, he could have been afraid to obey, saying, “I’m not strong enough. Send someone else.” But thankfully, Isaiah trusted in the cleansing work the Lord had completed in his life. He confessed and repented and then he *believed* in the power of God. As a result, he had a proper confidence for the mission God would give him.

Again, God cleansed Isaiah for a purpose. He had work for him to do. God wanted Isaiah to be his ambassador to the hard-hearted people in Jerusalem. And it’s the same for you and me. God cleanses us in order to put us to work in his service. “*For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*” (Eph 2:10). We must have faith in God’s cleaning power, that it is sufficient to make us ready to serve the Lord. Whatever those sins from our past that might plague us, whatever our past failings and ongoing stumbling blocks, nothing is an obstacle to the Lord. If he cleanses us, he can use us.

One of my favorite proverbs is Prov 30:8-9, because it describes a sweet spot of dependence upon the Lord. “*Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, lest I be full and deny you, saying, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and in my thievery profane my God’s name.*” Give me just enough, Lord, that I live faithfully in dependence upon you.

We could revise this proverb to capture the two sides of hard-heartedness in Isa 6. *Protect me from presumption, lest my heart be so proud that I cannot hear you. But also protect me from fear and self-pity, lest my heart be so faithless that I cannot obey you.* In other words, put me in that sweet spot of faith, Lord, so that my heart stays supple before you.

## CONCLUSION

At some point, all four of the Gospels quote from Isa 6:9-12. It’s a warning against the inevitable consequences of hard-heartedness. The soft-hearted, God says at the end of v. 10, see, hear, understand, repent, and are healed by the Lord. The hard-hearted, on the other hand, are like those whose senses are dulled. See v. 9. Their ears work, yet they don’t understand. Their eyes work, yet they don’t see. Why? Because they have hardened their hearts against the Lord. When you steel yourself against the Word of God, eventually even God’s word has a hardening effect on you.<sup>5</sup> That’s the point when God stops speaking words, and instead speaks to the hard-hearted through exile. See v 11-12: “*Until cities lie waste without inhabitant and houses without people and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.*” Sometimes exile is corporate, as in the case of the Babylonian exile. But that was long after King Uzziah’s very personal exile to solitary confinement as a leper. The same thing happens all the time today, when hearts become too hard to hear God’s word. People refuse God again and again, giving up on prayer and the Word, on worship and community, until finally it just doesn’t make any sense to remain part of the community of disciples. Yet exile is always a call to repentance; as long as you live, it’s never too late to turn back.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Pharaoh during the plagues of Egypt, in the Fall 2014 sermon series on Exodus.

Jesus is the key. At the end of v 13, it's Jesus who is the holy seed from the stump.<sup>6</sup> Jesus keeps a soft heart, all the way to the cross, so that we might have soft hearts too. His blood covers over our sins, cleansing us so that we draw near to our holy Father. And Jesus strengthens us, so that we can serve God faithfully, wherever he sends us. Jesus is the true hope for the hard of heart. His yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Lord, Dissolve My Frozen Heart  
Red Mountain Music

*Lord, dissolve my frozen heart,  
By the beams of love divine;  
This alone can warmth impart,  
To dissolve a heart like mine.*

*O that love, how vast it is!  
Vast it seems, though known in part;  
Strange indeed, if love like this,  
Should not melt the frozen heart.*

*The love of Christ passes knowledge.  
The love of Christ eases fear.  
The love of Christ hits a man's heart,  
It pierces him like a spear.*

*Savior, let thy love be felt,  
Let its power be felt by me,  
Then my frozen heart shall melt,  
Melt in love, O Lord to thee.*

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<sup>6</sup> See Isa 11:1ff.