

**“A Hard and Holy Privilege”**  
 Isaiah 6:8-13  
 by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*<sup>1</sup>In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:*

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
 the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

*<sup>4</sup>And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: “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; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”*

*<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup>And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”*

**Isaiah's Commission from the Lord**

*<sup>8</sup>And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” <sup>9</sup>And he said, “Go, and say to this people:*

*“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
 keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”*

*<sup>10</sup>Make the heart of this people dull,  
 and their ears heavy,  
 and blind their eyes;  
 lest they see with their eyes,  
 and hear with their ears,  
 and understand with their hearts,  
 and turn and be healed.”*

*<sup>11</sup>Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”  
 And he said:*

*“Until cities lie waste  
 without inhabitant,  
 and houses without people,  
 and the land is a desolate waste,  
<sup>12</sup>and the LORD removes people far away,  
 and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.*

*13 And though a tenth remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled.”*

*The holy seed is its stump.*

- Isaiah 6:6-13, ESV

## **God, Guilt, Grace, Gratitude – Jerry Bridges**

Some things simply follow one after another in logical sequence. If I walk into the house and smell cooking, I know something delicious is in my future. I also know I will probably eat too much of it and probably later regret it.

I listened to a teaching by Jerry Bridges on Isaiah 6 this past week, and it was excellent, as most things from Jerry Bridges usually are. He outlined the events of Isaiah 6 as the sequence of God, Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude:

- First, Isaiah met God.
- Then, having met the one true thrice-holy God, Isaiah was overwhelmed by his guilt for his sin.
- Having been confronted by God and having confessed his guilt, Isaiah received grace from God in the form of cleansing from sin and the removal of guilt.
- Finally, having been cleansed by grace, Isaiah expresses his overwhelming gratitude in the form of his eager willingness to go and represent the Lord to His people.

What is compelling to me is not just that this is the order in which the events of Isaiah 6 unfold; clearly, they do unfold in this order from God to Guilt to Grace to Gratitude. But what I find compelling is how they **must** unfold that way, not only for Isaiah but for all of God's people.

You cannot have a true encounter with God who is holy, holy, holy and not be overwhelmed by guilt over your sin and uncleanness. Once you confess your guilt to God, He will meet you with grace and forgive your guilt and cleanse the pollution of your sin by grace. And once you have been forgiven and cleansed by grace, how can you respond with anything less than true heartfelt gratitude.

This is actually the rhythm of our weekly worship. God calls us to worship Him and we respond with praise. He then confronts us with His word, and we respond by confessing

out guilt. He assures us of His grace, and we then respond with thanksgiving. We do this every week – or do we, really?

You see, you and I can go through the motions of doing something without really doing it from the heart. You can hear God’s word with your ears, have it vibrate your eardrums, and send signals to your brain and not really receive His word into your heart. You can be in the same room where God is meeting with people, speaking to them, revealing Himself, giving grace, and changing hearts, and you could just be bored, inattentive, or doing something out of routine, habit, or a sense of duty.

If you really meet with God, then your confession of your guilt will be heartfelt, God’s grace will be extended and received in spirit and in truth, and you will respond with heartfelt gratitude, including an eager desire to serve the Lord and answer His call on your life.

## **I. An Eager Response of Gratitude**

*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” – v. 8*

### **a. A Puzzling & Penetrating Question**

Immediately after Isaiah received his cleansing and forgiveness from the Lord, he hears the voice of the Lord, of the Sovereign One, the ruler on His throne, asking a puzzling and penetrating question. It’s a puzzling question because it is asked in both the singular and plural: “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” I think this is another Trinitarian hint in this passage, along with the three-fold proclamation of God’s holiness. God is both singular and plural. He is One in essence – one God – and three in person – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But it’s not just a puzzling question because of the shift from singular to the plural. The question itself challenges us: Why would God need someone to go for Him? He is the Sovereign One who rules over all and who alone can change hearts. So, why is He looking around for someone to go for Him?

God is not speaking out of need. Beware any sentence that begins with “God needs . . .” God is rather speaking out of His sovereign purpose and is extending the holy privilege of representing Him. He is giving a gracious opportunity. It is God’s purpose and will to speak

to His people through chosen, anointed, and sent people – those whom He calls and commissions to speak on His behalf. Could He work without human agency? Sure He could. He's God Almighty. Remember how He called Saul of Tarsus to Himself on the Road to Damascus? Jesus Himself appeared in glorious splendor and spoke directly to Saul. God can do that every time He chooses to save someone, but He has determined that He will use people as His ambassadors, to speak His word on His behalf.

### **b. A Grateful and Eager Response**

Isaiah wastes no time or words in responding to this gracious call. He immediately, eagerly, and gratefully speaks just two words in Hebrew: Here am I. Send me. Isaiah is not motivated to go by a desire for popularity of human acclamation. He is not seeking money, fame, power, or a lasting legacy. He is eager to go and grateful to be called because it is God who has cleansed Him by grace and called Him to this ministry.

Have you received saving and cleansing grace from God? Are you grateful for His redemption of you? Knowing how worthy and awesome He is, and knowing what it has cost Him to redeem you, how are you responding to His call on your life to walk with Him, to serve Him, to speak His words to others. To be called to belong to Jesus Christ by grace and to receive cleansing through His sacrifice is to be called to ministry both within the church as a member of the body of Christ and in the world as a citizen of His heavenly kingdom called to represent Him faithfully in the world.

## **II. A Hard & Holy Calling**

Now, just because Isaiah's call was a gracious commission and a holy privilege didn't mean it was easy. Like so many of the Old Testament prophets and so many of God's people through the centuries, Isaiah was given a hard calling –

*<sup>9</sup> And he said, "Go, and say to this people:*

*"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive."*

*<sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,*

*and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.”*

### **a. The Hard & Holy Commission**

What Isaiah is told to say to the people in verse 9 is a very strange construction in Hebrew:

*Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’*

What’s translated as “Keep on hearing” and “Keep on seeing” is an intensifier and can be translated as the King James renders it: “Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.” The idea is that, although the people will most definitely hear but they will not understand what it being said to them. Though they will see the prophetic ministry, they will not perceive the truth or urgency of what is being said.

It is never sufficient for someone to simply hear the Word of God with their ears or even to see miraculous signs from God with their eyes. We all live in the inescapable environment of revelation. The evidence of God’s handiwork in creation is all around us and even within our own bodies, and yet so many people are blind to the truth. The Bible is the most translated, most printed, best-selling, and most widely distributed book in the world by an order of 10 times more than the second-place books. Yet so many people never read their Bibles, and so many who have heard the Bible are closed and ignorant of its truth.

Jesus closed many of His teachings by saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” This line of Jesus is repeated in the Book of Revelation at the close of each of the seven letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The Bible is clear that, unless God opens our eyes and prepares our hearts, we remain blind and hard to the Word of God.

Verse 10 then makes it clear that the reason why the people will remain blind and ignorant to the truth of God’s Word is that God’s Word is actually being sent to them as a judgment against them –

*“Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,*

*and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.” – v. 10*

God’s people have been willfully sinning against Him and His clearly expressed Law for so long that now is a time of judgment. Jesus actually used the language of verse 10 to explain to His disciples why He taught the crowds of people in parables:

*10 Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”  
11 And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12 For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:*

*“You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

*15 For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed,  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

*16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17 For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*

- Matthew 13:10-17, ESV

We should be profoundly thankful if we are able to hear, understand, and believe in God’s Word. We don’t deserve that gift of God’s grace. And if you hear God’s word but do not understand it, if you see God working but you do not perceive it, then you should be concerned. You need to cry out to God for mercy and ask Him for eyes to see and ears to hear.

## **b. The Hard Reality of the Times**

Isaiah then asks a question:

*11 Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”*

*And he said:*

*“Until cities lie waste*

*without inhabitant,*

*and houses without people,*

*and the land is a desolate waste,*

*12 and the LORD removes people far away,*

*and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.*

This is a very sobering word God gives in response to Isaiah’s question. I wonder if Isaiah was starting to regret the eager quickness with which He answered the Lord’s call. We do know that Jeremiah at times complained to the Lord over how hard His calling was. He was sent to prophesy as a priest to Jerusalem during the very final days of Jerusalem as Babylon came and surrounded her and destroyed the Holy City. We don’t hear Isaiah complain. He asks questions, but then he does what God asks him to do, no matter how hard it may be.

We live in a challenging age. God’s people who are called by His name have neglected His word and walked in the ways of the world for generations. We have failed to be salt and light to a decaying and darkening culture. We have instead been too eager to embrace the world and its ways and bring them into the church, seeking fame, popularity, power, and influence. We have done so in the name of Christianity but not for the glory of God. We have done so for our own glory and honor of our own names and the advancement of our own kingdoms.

And so the culture has been denied the light of true Gospel influence and has sunk ever more and more into darkness. Are we under condemnation and beyond recovery, like Jerusalem and Judah in Isaiah’s day? I don’t know for sure, but consider this: Some people hold out hope that a couple of election victories by the right people can turn things around for America. Politically, during and after Isaiah’s ministry, Jerusalem was blessed with the two greatest kings they had since David – King Hezekiah reigned during Isaiah’s ministry and King Josiah reigned during Jeremiah’s ministry. But powerful, God-honoring political leaders and powerful, God-anointed prophets were not sufficient to truly turn the hearts of the people back to God. It was too late. God was sending judgment.

What we can plead for and seek is true and sincere repentance for ourselves. We can confess the times when we have not truly heard or responded obediently to God’s word. We can grieve over our own hard-heartedness, and we can also resolve, like Isaiah, to answer the Lord’s call and speak God’s Word plainly

What I find so compelling here is that, given what Isaiah is told very clearly in his calling, he obviously is not proclaiming the Word of God because he's hoping to be successful in any way. He's not even primarily motivated by love for his fellow countrymen and a desire to see their hearts turned to the Lord. This may sound odd, but our primary concern and motivation is proclaiming the Gospel to someone cannot be our love for them and our desire to see them come to salvation. Rather, we must first be compelled by love for God and a desire to honor Him faithfully. We must want to speak His words and represent Him well because we love Him above all.

Someone once said that you should not go and serve as a missionary primarily because you love the people God is sending you to serve. People will disappoint you. You will never see as much fruit as you're hoping to see. Some hearts will remain unchanged, some lives remain lost. It is the love of God poured out into our hearts, the grace of His forgiveness and cleansing of us, that must be our driving and primary motivation.

### **III. The Unexpected Hope: The Holy Seed is the Stump**

Does Isaiah's call mean there's no hope at all for God's people? Is the message just unrelenting judgment? You may want to know that now because, after all, we're only in chapter 6 of 66 chapters in this book.

Well, verse 13 brings in a powerful hope in a very unexpected way:

*And though a tenth remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled.”  
The holy seed is its stump.*

The principle of the holy remnant, the tithe of the people who remain after judgment, is brought into view at the beginning of verse 13. Many people would have said, “Ah, yes. The nation will be judged and sent into exile, but a holy remnant will remain, and they are the hope for the future of Israel.” This is a theme you can find in the prophets, but that is not Isaiah's message here.

Isaiah says that even the tenth that remains will be burned. Everything will be removed by cutting and then by fire, until there's only a charred stump that remains. There will be no hope from a human perspective.



And yet, the very last line of chapter 6 proclaims, “The holy seed is the stump.” What’s left when everything is cut down and burned away? The holy seed remains – the promised seed of the woman, the promised Seed of Abraham, the promised Seed of David. It remains, deep in the stump. With God, hope is never lost. Hope is never to be found in human strategies and tactics, human potential or politics. Hope is found in the holy seed, who is the stump.

Isaiah 11 unfolds the holy seed in the stump –

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*

*<sup>2</sup> And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

*<sup>3</sup> And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*

*<sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

*<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt of his loins. – Isaiah 11:1-5, ESV*

King Jesus is the Holy Seed and our eternal, unshakable hope!

### **Have you heard the call of grace? How have you responded?**

So, as we close, a simple question: Have you heard the call of God’s grace on your life? Have you responded with heartfelt gratitude and a willingness to do whatever He says, to go wherever He sends, and to speak His word faithfully and clearly, no matter what the response may be? We don’t know how people might respond to the Word of God, and we don’t know what the immediate future holds for the church or this land of our earthly exile, but we know what the ultimate future holds, and we know who holds every day between today and that day. Will we trust and obey Him?