

Even morally upstanding people are undone in the presence of God's holiness, but thankfully he purifies people and sends them on mission. Although his assignments don't always feel pleasant or fruitful in the moment, God's purposes are always good in the end. Are you eager to be sent?

Introduction: There is a yearning for a return to Eden, and a longing for heaven on earth. Why is this the case? I think because we hunger for the holy.

Background: Judah's King Uzziah reigned during a period of national prosperity. A godly and beloved king, the Bible records this noteworthy sin: he flouted God's holiness when "his heart was lifted up" and thereafter usurped the role of priest by burning incense in the temple (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Thus God made him a leper to reflect his unclean heart. Uzziah's death signaled a turning point in the political landscape of the ancient Near East as the violent nation of Assyria would begin to rise as a world power. In this crisis of national unholiness and international upheaval God appears to Isaiah in a vision.

## I. The Trauma of the Holy

### A. A vision of God's holiness (vv. 1-4)

Isaiah, perhaps while practicing the routines of regular worship, is caught up in a vision that transports him to God's heavenly temple where he experiences the overwhelming holiness that surrounds Almighty God. He sees the Lord enthroned on high. God appears so gigantic that the train or hem of his royal robe fills the whole temple. Circling above God in the air are six-winged seraphs—fiery angelic beings—that chant to each other "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of armies; the whole earth is full of his glory." No other place in the OT is any description, even of God's character, raised to the power of three. The seraphs use two pairs of wings to cover their eyes and feet to shield themselves from God's holiness. God's holy voice and presence traumatize his surroundings too.

### B. Undone by God's holiness (v. 5)

Isaiah calls down a curse upon himself, "Woe is me." Perhaps for the first time in his life, he gets a realistic and accurate assessment of his own moral purity. Like proud Uzziah, he has leprosy of the heart! He is undone (lost, doomed, destroyed, ruined). He sees the eternal King and is caught having morally filthy lips. Both personally and corporately he stands condemned.

## II. The Cleansing of the Unholy

### A. Temple sacrifice for sin (v. 6)

Isaiah's unholiness requires the work of temple sacrifice. One of the seraphs plucked a burning coal from the altar. Remember that once a year on the Day of Atonement burning coals were taken into the Most Holy Place (the inner sanctuary where God's throne resided) in order to ignite the incense. It's possible that in a beautiful act of poetic redemption, God completes the unresolved plight of Uzziah by touching the lips of another who finds himself unclean and undone in the temple, cleansing him with a fiery touch from the altar. The live altar coal encapsulates all the themes of atonement, propitiation, satisfaction, forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation.

### B. Personal atonement of sin (v. 7)

No general atonement of impersonal pardon for sinners will do. His own unclean lips must be touched for atonement of his own sin. With lips cleansed, Isaiah finds assurance of personal forgiveness. He is now redeemed and qualified to proclaim the only hope for the world, the overruling grace of God. This same grace is available to all who confess their own uncleanness before God (Isaiah 1:18). The perfect atonement that purifies Isaiah for serving the King is a symbol of the perfect sacrifice of God himself in his son Jesus Christ (John 1:29).

### III. The Mission of the Holy

#### A. Faithfully declare God's Word (v. 8)

Next God commissions Isaiah as his prophet. God now enables and sends the one who had unclean lips like the leprous Uzziah (cf. Leviticus 13:45) to declare God's message. God's grace leads Isaiah from despair ("Woe is me!") to confidence ("Here I am!"). He has entered God's missionary society because God is a missional God.

#### B. Even though most people will reject it (vv. 9-10)

Isaiah's prophetic and evangelistic ministry would not exactly be considered successful in the way we normally measure success. Here is the essence of Isaiah's message: "Keep on hearing, but don't understand; keep on hearing, but don't perceive." God's intent is to present the gospel to his stubborn people to increase their guilt and sin when they reject him. Verses 9-10 are quoted and alluded to many times in the NT to explain that the gospel always has this effect (Matthew 13:14-15; John 12:39-40; Acts 28:25-27; Romans 11:8; cf. WCF 5.6). Broad and well-trod is the path that leads to destruction, and narrow and less-taken is the way that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14).

#### C. God will purify the world through judgment and grace (vv. 11-13)

1. Isaiah is eager for his second assignment. "How long, O Lord?" God's answer is not encouraging, but it is an expression of his holy character, and so it is good. Since Isaiah's land and people are too far gone in their rejection of the Lord, God must execute the judgments of the covenant. In this case, a judgment of exile and desolation. God will send "humanity" far away from his presence in the God-forsaken Promised Land. Yet in the end there will be redemption and salvation for Israel. Exile will not end in execution.

2. God promises he will preserve a believing remnant. After judgment and exile there will be a burst of divine grace that will ultimately prevail. Why does Isaiah intentionally set both judgment and grace side by side? Because both truths buoy the faithful to endure hardship and trial. Faith and holiness are not a promise of immunity from living in dark times. But in the midst of darkness the "holy seed" people who hope in the true Holy Seed (Jesus Christ; cf. Gal 3:16) have gospel hope that enables them to persevere in God's mission. Even when the results are not pleasant or fruitful because they hope in God's covenant promises (2 Corinthians 3:12; Col 1:5 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; 2 Thessalonians 2:15-16). This is why you should hope in the sovereign grace of our holy-holy-holy God during seasons of widespread cultural impurity and worldwide instability.

Conclusion: Are you shaken and afraid of rampant immorality that is celebrated, approved, and sometimes even legislated as mandatory? Are you filled with fear of the violence rocking our nation and the world? Look at Isaiah's vision of Christ the Lord (John 12:41). He is so big, so holy, and so in-control of the whole world. The whole earth is full of his glory, despite most people's stubborn refusal to see it. He will handle

the world with judgment and grace. It's the way he's always done it, and he promises to finish the job. Pray for eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind that perceives. When you begin to understand the Holy One whom Isaiah encountered in the heavenly temple, you will fear God more and the world less. The politics of fear will no longer traumatize you. Instead you'll be undone by God's holiness, but restored by Christ's sacrificial grace. You'll discover, again or perhaps for the first time, God's call and commission on your life to be his holy ambassador, a messenger of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Humble, eager, and full of Christian hope.