
Isaiah Series 1

Lesson 2

“Isaiah 6:1-13”

Objective - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

Materials - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

Procedures

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

6:1 In the year of the death of King Uzziah, I saw the Lord sitting upon the throne high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphim were standing above him, each one had six wings, with two, each covered his face and with two, each covered his feet and with two, each flew. ³ And this one called to another and said holy, holy, holy, is Yahweh of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory. ⁴ And the thresholds of the doorposts quivered from the voice of the one crying out and the house filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said to myself, I am destroyed, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, Yahweh Sabaoth. ⁶ And one of the Seraphim flew toward me and in his hand was a glowing coal seized in the altar tongs from upon the altar. ⁷ And he touched it upon my mouth and said, “behold this has touched upon your lips and removed your guilt and covered your sin offering.” ⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord say, “whom shall I send and who will go us?” And I said, “behold I will go for us.”

⁹ And he said, “Go and say to this people, listen intently, and do not discern, and look intently, and do not learn. ¹⁰ Make the heart of

this people fat, and their ears heavy and their eyes blinded lest the people see with their eyes, and with their ears hear, and with their heart understand and return and be healed.” ¹¹ And I said, “until when Lord,” and he said, “until the cities are in ruins, bereft of inhabitants and the houses are without men and the ground lies totally ruined. ¹² and Yahweh removes the men and great becomes the desertion in the midst of the land. ¹³ And the duration of it will be if a tenth remain, it will be allowed to burn the same as a terebinth, or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

This chapter which is most often considered to represent the commissioning of the prophet Isaiah may be divided into two parts: the *commissioning* (verses 1-8), and the *message*, which is entrusted to the prophet as the message bearer from the court of the heavenly government of Yahweh (verses 9-13). The vision comes in the text of Isaiah 6 as an immediate and direct experience of the holiness of Yahweh as it appeared to Isaiah. A tremendous amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to this chapter and as one might expect this has led to a tremendous diversity as to what is meant to be

envisioned by the reader here. Certainly there are cultic elements here relating to the temple and Jerusalem and these elements are of importance as we examine this text.¹ They need to be kept in mind as a reference point for this communication.

It is of interest that Targum of Isaiah struggles immediately with some of the details that are clear in the Masoretic text (the Hebrew text used in the translation of our English Bibles) and the early Greek translation (The Septuagint) of Isaiah. At verse one in the Targum, the time of chapter six is not seen as at the time Uzziah's death, but at the time that he was stricken, it appears to see chapter 6 as being at the time that Uzziah was stricken with leprosy. This may have been an attempt on the part of the translators of the Targum to align the vision here in some way with 2 Chronicles 26:19-22.² There also appears to

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 57.

² **26:19 Uzziah, who had an incense censer in his hand, became angry. While he was ranting and raving²⁵ at the priests, a skin disease²⁶ appeared on his forehead right there in front of the priests in the Lord's temple near the incense altar. 26:20 When Azariah the high priest and the other priests looked at²⁷ him, there was a skin disease on his forehead. They hurried him out of there; even the king²⁸ himself wanted to leave quickly because the Lord had afflicted him. 26:21 King Uzziah suffered from a skin disease until the day he died. He lived in separate quarters,²⁹ afflicted by a skin disease and banned from the Lord's temple. His son Jotham was in charge of the palace and ruled over the people of the land.**

26:22 The rest of the events of Uzziah's reign, from start to finish, were recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. NRSV

be an attempt on the part of the translators of the Targum to make it clear that one cannot see Yahweh and there are tremendous efforts to insure that this vision is not seen as being of an angelic being representing Yahweh. There is also an effort on the part of the Targum translator to insure that this vision is not seen as somehow advocating polytheism. The Seraphim are not called Seraphim in the Targum and are carefully identified as attendants whose entire purpose is to serve modestly before Yahweh, without seeing, or being seen.³

The context of Isaiah 6, in our Bibles, is set chronologically in the year of King Uzziah's death. Due to a number of uncertainties, including the issue of the co-regency of his son, there remains a certain amount of disagreement over affixing an absolute date. Some choose 742 B.C. while others prefer the year 736 B.C. The type of introduction that is found in Isaiah 6 is highly unusual in Hebrew literature (one that is really concerned with dating), and this is perhaps an indication that what is more important than a specific date, which is more of a modern concept, is the linking of this event with the death of Uzziah.

This then links Isaiah's vision as anchored squarely in Israel's history. In

³ Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum*, In The Aramaic Bible series, Vol. 11 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), pp. 14-15.


this sense it functions much like the inclusion of Pontius Pilate in the Apostle's Creed. By including the name of King Uzziah, a major turning point in Yahweh's dealings with Israel is marked out. From a strictly historical perspective Uzziah's death designates the end of an age of relative stability for Judah and the beginning of the instability augmented by the Assyrian threat. More important however for Isaiah, is the nature of this turning point in Yahweh's interactions with his people. In Isaiah 6 we see the government of Yahweh as it impacts the life of Judah and that life is transformed by the divine purpose.⁴

This will be the first time in biblical history that the veil is pulled back, in this way, upon the governmental center of Yahweh's court. This allows the people of Judah and Israel to have a transformed perspective upon the universe. It is from this central point, that is envisioned in terms of the Temple at Jerusalem, that edicts go out from Yahweh and become reality. The Temple in Jerusalem is seen as somehow a representation of the true seat of Yahweh's holiness in heaven. This understanding will impact the people of Yahweh at multiple levels, but one immediate affect is how Israel will view

⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in the Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 54-55.

prophesy. Prophecy is elevated to something that is directly commissioned by Yahweh Himself and as such it is without question something that will become reality. The commissioning of Isaiah links the words of Yahweh to the prophet in such a way as to make the prophet a mouthpiece for Yahweh and his words must be seen as Yahweh's words.

Whatever personal dimension there is to the commissioning of Isaiah, in which the text really seems to have no interest, it is generally recognized that the call narrative is a highly stylized, intentionally structured literary unit. It is also seen as a classic outline of proper worship of Yahweh, which is sequenced as (a) praise (verses 1-4); (b) confessions (verse 5); (c) forgiveness (verses 6-7); and (d) commissioning to a prophetic vocation (verse 8). This should still be a classic outline of what worship should represent for us today. The nature of Isaiah's calling is not so much intended to impact our understanding of the man Isaiah as it is intended to impact our understanding of his book. It is in reality the book that is commissioned as a divine spokesman for Yahweh. The man would pass from existence, but the book would continue to deliver the prophetic



message of Yahweh from generation to generation. As such the book continues to proclaim prophetic authority from the throne of Yahweh, long after the prophetic personality that we knew as the man Isaiah has departed from the scene. In a canonical approach to the text of Isaiah this utterance makes the claim of divine authority for what is contained in it. In this way we can see past the authorization of the prophet to the authorization of the book that continues to speak authoritatively to the faithful for generation after generation; to the community that heeds the message of the text.⁵


At the throne of Yahweh we are at the core of holiness from which is decreed all that happens everywhere. The attempt at verbalizing the effect of being in the presence of the holiness of Yahweh overwhelms the senses and is portrayed in such a way that indicates that before the incalculable holiness of Yahweh, everything must yield. The intrusion of the holiness of Yahweh into the life of the prophet is disruptive, sudden, and in the face of it everything else must yield. In the face of such overwhelming holiness comes a sudden self-realization of the inadequacy of the prophet-observer. He lacks any

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 57-58.

qualification for even the mere observance of such holiness and his response is one of woe and lostness in the face of this revelation. The prophet understands that he is in dire straits, he is reduced to nothingness by comparison. There is no sense of coziness, or comfort in this vision. The vision of the holiness of Yahweh evokes the condemnation of the human participant and his community.⁶ It is only in this moment when the reality of truth impacts Isaiah that he is prepared for what will happen next. The truth is that he is in a totally hopeless situation. There is nothing for him to do but to accept his fate.

In verses 6-7, however we learn that the Yahweh, whose holiness undoes and dismantles, is also the same God who has procedures for reclamation and restoration of those that are undone and without any hope in themselves. One of the Seraphim effectively ministers to the one who is undone. The application of the live coals from the altar to the human recipient represents something that is both dangerous and painful. The effect of this painful and dangerous undertaking is the complete cleansing and rehabilitation of the


⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 58-59.



recipient. He is now transformed into a guiltless person whose sin has been blotted out by the act of Yahweh's agent, obviously at Yahweh's direction. This rehabilitation then allows the recipient to occupy a legitimate place in the presence of Yahweh. This is a part of the worship process and comes only after the introduction of praise, realization, repentance and an act of Yahweh.⁷


It is important to note that this process was not carried out so that the prophet could now leisurely enjoy his new found status of being in the presence of Yahweh. This action was carried out as part of the commissioning process that now allowed the prophet to fulfill a function in the plan of Yahweh. Surely this is at the heart of the reason for all worship and should be the desire and the call of all true worship. We are called upon to become useful and fulfill a purpose within the plan of Yahweh. We become a part of Yahweh's government. We are not rehabilitated, cleansed, or forgiven for our own pleasure, but in order to be able to fulfill a divine destiny. We are made in the image of God and as such we were created with a purpose. In this account, in Isaiah 6, we are called to understand that Yahweh has a role not only

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 59.



for Isaiah, but in the delivering of his prophecy he has a role for those that will hear and heed the words of Yahweh. This prophesy is chilling: The message will not positively impact the majority, as a matter of fact the majority seem to have been inoculated to the message by the sending of blindness, deafness, and lack of understanding.

This powerful and moving image draws our attention and captivates our imaginations, but as we examine the entire image it should also generate terror in us. This image does not bring an altogether happy and uplifting message. The message brought by this image is one that not only challenges us by bringing us into contact with Yahweh, but it also challenges us because we wonder on what basis Isaiah is spared and others appear to be destined for ignorance and destruction. As human beings we so often pride ourselves on our cleverness, our cultured sophistication, but the imagery here strips that facade away. It may be easy to wear that mask when we compare ourselves with the other creatures that we see around us sharing this planet, but by comparison to Yahweh even his presence drives us to the realization that we are not what we would like to deceive ourselves into believing we are. We are less than nothing, we are darkness in




comparison to light and we all know what happens when light bursts into darkness, it eradicates the darkness. The light of Yahweh is powerful and intense that it consumes even that which would cast a shadow. Isaiah comes to understand this and recognizes that he is ruined.

It is in the moment of his greatest despair that Yahweh comes to the rescue and brings hope where there was none. He chooses to cleanse, to purify, to eradicate the darkness, to transform. It is at this moment that Isaiah is given standing before Yahweh as what he was created to be. It is interesting that Isaiah does not seem to rest in this moment because as he is cleansed after having his eyes opened, his ears unstopped and his heart enlightened with understanding he hears the call to service and responds. Some may say, “what an honor.” I am not sure that if they saw what was to come they would think it was. Isaiah was to prophesy before his people, many times challenging the words and the will of the king and the people. He was to speak the words of Yahweh. Some might think that Yahweh would protect him from shame, hardship and being hated by his people. The reality is that as Yahweh’s messenger he would suffer shame (he went around

naked for 3 years), hardship and hatred (the tradition is that he was sawn in two while still alive).

Despite all of this the understanding of his heart would drive him to follow Yahweh rather than have an easy life, rather than to say nothing, or to do nothing. Isaiah would become a man driven by his passion, that for most would remain invisible to them. The power of this vision would continue to drive and inspire Isaiah to fulfill his destiny in the face of all that would come. He would stand and castigate kings for their lack of faith he would prophesy the death and destruction of some of the most powerful people on the planet. Why? Because he was driven by his heart and soul which had seen the true king, the true source of all real power. As far as we can see Isaiah never wavered in his task. Some might have responded differently than Isaiah did to the call of Yahweh to “go.” They might have wanted to read the fine print of the contract first, they might have wanted a clause that guaranteed their protection, or an out clause. Isaiah could perhaps have pleaded temporary insanity due to intoxication at seeing Yahweh, but as the book of Isaiah attests he persevered and seems to



show no concern for himself. He is single-mindedly drawn into his mission before Yahweh.

Today, we so often think our call by God is different, kinder, gentler, less intense, but in reality this is not so. We are called to recognize that our call is even more clear, more intense, more urgent than the call of Isaiah. We are called by an understanding of the cost cleansing brings to Yahweh, the ends he was willing to go to in order to cleanse us and call us home to our true destiny as servants of Yahweh. We don't much like being called servants, some tolerate it because it is better than the alternative, but the call of God cannot truly come without a true understanding of our reality before God. We are utterly ruined, only he can deliver the miraculous cleansing that is necessary before we can be of any use in the kingdom whatever, before we can stand without being consumed by the great holiness, righteousness, and power of God.

We are called to servitude not because we are bad, we are called to servitude because God is good, and it is his will. This is what we were created to be. We were created in the image of God in order to fulfill a function. We are to display the nature of God. That nature

includes a selflessness that hurts, consumes and subsumes the individual that we are in order to willingly seek only to be and do what honors and displays his nature and glory. This is the call of Yahweh to Isaiah and it remains the call of Yahweh to those who would hear his call today and answer with the phrase, "Here I am send me." The call may be to serve in Lubbock, Texas, as a doctor ministering to Ebola victims in West Africa, to minister broken children at the Children's Home of Lubbock, as a faithful husband, father, or mother, wife, son or daughter. Whatever the call it is a radical intense call to go in the way of Yahweh and not to follow the way of the world.

The prophesy that Isaiah is called to deliver seems to us to be wrong, to be unrighteous, to be cruel and unmerciful, but the reality is something else. This prophesy comes at a time when God has tried time and time again to draw his creation back to him in the time of Noah, in the time of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David and all the times in between. Thousands and thousands of years have gone by and over and over again the patience of Yahweh has been tried and tested by ungrateful and unrepentant people. If something drastic is not done all will forever be lost. God could just wad up the whole of creation and

start over. Often for us things get so twisted up that there is now no redemption. God chose instead, at great personal sacrifice to himself, (that is his nature) to continue and pursue his dream without starting over and destroying creation and us with it. He has a plan of healing, but first there must be a cleansing of that which is corrupt and only fit for destruction. Israel had heard the accusations before that they were blind and deaf (cf. Deuteronomy 28:29; Proverbs 28:27), this was part of the consequence of failing to keep covenant with God.

The messenger from Yahweh would play an active role in hardening and dulling, so that repentance would not take place. The decision has been made to destroy much of Judah and now the messenger would become a part of what previously had been the spirit's task in 1 Kings 22:20-23. The task of Isaiah is even closer to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:7, 12, 34-35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). It is certainly correct to say that this is not a one-sided action. When Isaiah receives the message to be delivered to Judah the decision has already been made and the die is cast for what will come upon Judah. It is interesting that the task of Isaiah was to be one that those during his time would not see as a success. The people

would not hear his message and repent. His task was not to be a success, to give a message that would be well-received by the people his task was to deliver a message from Yahweh to his people.⁸

What would have normally been expected is that the people seeing and hearing the message of God would lead to their understanding. The message here is not a message calling the people to repentance it is a message announcing what Yahweh is going to do.⁹ The time for repentance has passed. This is a troubling concept for us, as are many others such as death. Men have continually invented ways to try and make this not true and yet Scripture screams that it is repeatedly. There is a point where repentance is no longer an option and here Isaiah speaks words to those who have passed that point. You may ask why? There are more to come and those that would come would find hope in the words of Isaiah as well as great challenge. The hope would be in the fact that the message indicates that there is still hope, from God, perhaps small, but there appears to be some sense of hope in the seed of the stump.

⁸ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Revised Ed., in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 24 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 109.

⁹ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, p. 109.

Clearly the message that Isaiah was told to deliver caused him distress and he asks how long (verse 6:11)? The message that Isaiah delivers is effectively a curse on Israel and Isaiah understands this and seeks hope in the duration. He wants to know is it permanent or temporary? Is this a chastisement that is intended to bring about the eventual healing of that nation, or is this a message marking their permanent exclusion? The answer given does not answer the question without an element of equivocation. It speaks of the total destruction of houses, cities, fields and people. It leaves the question of the future rehabilitation of the land and the people in a vague fog.¹⁰ It appears that God has given up on his people, they have repeatedly rejected him and now it appears that they are to be nullified as a people. They are to cease to be in the world. Yahweh will protect them and rescue them no more and will even actively intervene to undo them.¹¹

This message of nullification is qualified only by the enigmatic statement at the end of verse 13. The three words comprising this final statement are far from clear, something about holy seed,


¹⁰ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, pp. 109-110.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 61-62.

something about the impossible. It is possible to take this final statement as a further reiteration of the judgment of Israel. If however, we take this final statement in the context of the whole book of Isaiah we know that the concern of the book is one of the deep loss of Jerusalem and the exile of the people, but there is a message of fragile restoration. The last line of verse 13 looks quickly beyond the devastation, and cursed destruction of the oracle to an enigmatic ray of potential hope. Verses 9-10 would loom large on the horizon of Israel as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes and finally the Persians would come onto the scene. These words of 9-10 would also loom large in the Gospel accounts as applied to Jesus himself as he was rejected by a people that failed to see, hear, and repent, and understand what God was doing in the Messiah.¹²

The people of Israel would continue to suffer from spiritual blindness in the time of Christ and therefore they would reject him and his message. God uses even the resistance of Jews to open his message to the Gentiles (Acts 28:26-28). Because of the failure to listen on the part of the Jews the message would go out to the Gentiles


¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 62.



and they would hear and understand, see and believe. The early church is able to see in the words given by Isaiah the prophet the rejection of Jesus as a parallel to the rejection of the prophetic word. In both instances the texts are haunted by an awareness that the resistance of those who fail to understand is in some way initiated by God's negation. This passage, and its usage in the New Testament seems to us harsh. The reality is that harsh consequences come with the rejection of the rule of God. It is hard for us to see that the purposes of God are accomplished even in the midst of the stubbornness of human beings who reject his rule. "There are no ready turnings. The healings are not readily available, and the turnings are too demanding. There is no easy gospel, no cheap grace, no good word that gives assurances to those who drop by hoping for a quick and comfortable deal."¹³

To be sure there is a message of comfort at the end of this oracle, but it comes late, almost as an afterthought. It is a small hope, thin, but it only comes after much pain, heartache and destruction. We all too easily want to move from the horrid events of Friday to the

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 62-63.



victory of Sunday, but the reality is that there is a long hard road between Friday and Sunday. Life and its pain and heartaches seem endless, but focus needs to be kept where it belongs, the throne of God. We must not seek to arrive too early, or too easily at the Sunday. It is a hard and treacherous road that is only possible to navigate with the merciful intervention of God.

Synopsis

This chapter has been a lightening rod for scholars as they have come to it in our era, but for most of its history it has been a supremely inspiring account of the holiness of Yahweh and at the same time a chilling reminder of the consequences of continued disobedience. This passage reports the end of one era in the history of Israel and the beginning of a new era. This new era will be one where the holiness of Yahweh will be in predominant view in his dealings with Israel. In the midst of this prophesy there continue to be calls to true and proper worship of Yahweh, even in the midst of words of condemnation. Not only are their teachings about worship there are also rays of sunshine in the cleansing of Isaiah and in the prophesy regarding the seed in the stump. The imagery here is caste in the context of the Temple and the worship there and this would further infuse these words with a sense of awe, or at least it should.

The great vision of the ministers of Yahweh is a vision of those who will not even look upon him, they cover themselves and they will not even touch the surface where his holiness resides. The imagery

here is intended to generate awe and to produce understanding and yet the very message that Isaiah is given is that it will not have this affect upon his audience. They will continue to fail to see, fail to understand, fail to repent and therefore they will pass from existence. Finally, in the final words of Isaiah's prophesy here, when understood in the context of the rest of the book we catch a glimpse of a possible ray of light. God may yet save some. There is a glint of hope.

This passage, and Isaiah as a whole proved to be a powerful force in the history of Israel and the early church. This book was highly valued by the community at Qumran and by the early church. The words of Isaiah were seen to reveal the hand of Yahweh in the punishment of Israel and also in hope for the future. These words too challenge us today to worship Yahweh properly, in light of who he is, and in light of who, and what, we are. These words challenge us to understand and obey God, to understand that we may only stand in his presence at his pleasure and with his merciful rescue.

Questions

1. How do you think the death of a king might have impacted the people who had lived for a long time under his reign?
2. Why do you think Isaiah was shown Seraphim?
3. What does it mean to be holy?
4. Why do you think the Seraphim continually cry out holy, holy, holy?
5. Why do you think Isaiah thought he was ruined?
6. What do you think it means for Isaiah to be ruined?
7. What is the purpose of the smoke in the vision?
8. What do you think the glowing coal represents? Why?
9. What is guilt?
10. How do you remove guilt?
11. Why would anyone seek to remove guilt?
12. Why do you think Isaiah volunteered to deliver the message?
13. How would you feel if you were told to deliver a message, or perform a task that you knew would be a failure? Why?
14. Why are we so driven to be a success?
15. What do you think this message says to us today?