

Biblestudy Mondaymorning June 2, 2025 on Isaiah 6

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It's a time of international anxiety. Great powers are manoeuvring, and long-established alliances seem to be shifting. The sense of security felt by former generations now seems like complacency; exceptionalism, even. Because there are wars, and fears of war, and they are no longer far away. Former allies now feel like threats. There are reports of chilling war crimes.

This is the world we enter when we open Isaiah at chapter 6. Sorry, did you think I was talking about something else?

Perhaps you'll turn with me to this chapter, which we'll read as we go along rather than in one big chunk at the start.

You'll be familiar with this text, I'm sure. The great vision it gives us of God enthroned in the heavens, surrounded by the angelic beings who declaim his holiness and glory.

Of course this is the great scene describing Isaiah commissioning as a prophet. But it is also a vital and potent message to us who seek to be radical disciples today. Because Isaiah is being called bear faithful witness to God's word and his ways; to bear witness, by word and by action, to the new thing that God is doing. And although that is seen perhaps most clearly in the later chapters of Isaiah, such as those we read yesterday and which Merlyn preached from so powerfully, we also read these themes in the early chapters of Isaiah. So no matter which view we take of Isaian authorship – and I'm certainly not going to get into that today – *this* Isaiah, Isaiah of Jerusalem, is being called to bear witness to the new heavens and the new earth.

And so he provides a pattern for us.

You see the ministry that Isaiah is being called to means that he will at times be given glimpses of a future when God would act decisively in history. Along with the other prophets he called it 'the day of the Lord' or sometimes, simply, 'on that day'. But what Isaiah could not see, from his vantage point in history, is that he was actually glimpsing multiple events, more than one great moment when God would act decisively in history. Often his vision of the day of the Lord seems to refer to the Babylonian exile. But sometimes it is the Messianic moment which he foresees. And sometimes it is the eschaton – those events which are still in our future.

So the day of the Lord that Isaiah was called to proclaim – we live in the middle of it. We live – *obviously* – after the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but before the new heavens and the new earth. And so we, like Isaiah, but in an even more profound way, are called to testify – by word and action, through our message and our lives – that the day of the Lord has come, that we live in the time of jubilee, the year of the Lord's favour, and that we urgently await its final and total manifestation.

Our commission is Isaiah's commission on steroids. And so we have much to learn from this chapter.

It all begins *in the year that king Uzziah died*. Perhaps we don't notice this. Perhaps we hear the words and hurry on to the excitement of what follows. But this is a marker of threat to those in the know. It's a reminder of danger – as if we said: “in Germany in 1932”, or “on 10th September 2001”.

Because towards the end of Uzziah's reign, rumours had began to arrive. There was troubling news from the north-east. The great empire of Assyria, which had been slumbering for generations, was just starting to awake under its expansionist ruler Tiglath-Pileser III. Here began a century of cruel dominance in the entire region.

It was during Uzziah's reign that king Menahem of Israel had had to buy off the Assyrians with a thousand talents of silver which he in turn extracted from his subjects. But though the mighty empire continued to rattle its sabres, for the people of Judah, Israel to the north was a convenient buffer zone that would protect them from attack. Surely everything was fine.

But now, Uzziah has died. His 52-year reign is over. And suddenly, things don't feel quite so secure any more.

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So this troubling world is the context in which Isaiah receives his vision.

He tells us:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ² Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said,

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

So, following the frisson of fear that the date-stamp introduces, Isaiah presents this image of God seated on the throne, filling the whole earth with his glory, and surrounded by angelic beings who declaim his holiness. *But* then the chapter ends with a picture of total destruction:

“Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;
¹² until the Lord sends everyone far away,
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

Isaiah is foreseeing the very thing that everyone in Judah feared. This is a foreshadowing of the exile: of defeat, deportation, loss and longing.

This chapter looks squarely into that future and declares it unflinchingly. It doesn't say “I saw the Lord and everything was rainbows and puppies.” Quite the opposite, actually. There is nothing saccharine about this book.

But it has a word that speaks boldly into the darkest shadows of the political threat. Because above it all, God is on the throne.

Here is our starting point. God is on the throne. He is the unsurprising sovereign, the Lord of history. And we will never move far from this truth.

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I said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

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Woe is me!

God appears to humans in a number of forms in the Old Testament. Sometimes he seems like a man or an angel. Sometimes he is just a voice, like when he calls to Samuel, or speaks to Elijah on the mountain.

Sometimes, more scarily, he appears in what is technically known as a theophany – fire, smoke, thunder, lightning, earthquake and wind. Such appearances are powerful, terrifying.

But Isaiah’s vision here is even more powerful than this. His vision is not of a *representation* of God in fire and smoke. Here – in some mysterious way – he appears to glimpse God himself. Seated on this throne – the ultimate king, with ultimate power, in utter holiness.

And in the face of such knowledge, in the face of such glory, there is really only one appropriate posture of body and heart.

It is to fall on our faces and declare that we are undone.

- So Isaiah says “Woe is me”.
- So John of Patmos, encountering the risen Christ, falls at his feet as though dead.
- And so Peter the disciple, suddenly and painfully aware of whose presence he stands in, cries out “depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful man”.

It’s really the only thing to do.

And for Isaiah, who is about to be commissioned to be a prophet, this is the essential starting point. “Woe is me, for I am undone”.

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Now, if someone had sidled up to Isaiah one day with the message that God was calling him to be his spokesperson, Isaiah would probably have said “No. No. The job is too difficult. God’s people are too stubborn. The message is too uncomfortable. I cannot hear God clearly enough. I cannot speak clearly enough. The task is too great.”

But faced with the enormity and wonder of God’s presence he says none of these things. Rather, he offers a far more primal “No!”

Woe is me! I am undone!

In other words “I am a dead man walking. There is no hope for me.”

My eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.

In other words “I know now how small is my greatness, how trivial my significance, how vain my pretensions.”

Before Isaiah’s “yes” to God is his primal “No.”

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God is still calling a people who will speak for him in our day. And before we give God our yes – and we *must* give God our yes – we must first give him our profound and primal *no*.

- No, I cannot do this. No, I am a person of unclean lips. No, I am but a broken vessel.

Not because the task is too great; but because the Lord is too holy. There is nothing I can do to make myself worthy of this calling.

We must be awed *by the God who calls us*, not by the task he calls us to do.

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Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.

This burning ember from the altar – the place where animals are sacrificed to make peace between God and his people – this is what cleanses Isaiah’s lips and makes him fit for service.

Notice the direction of action. It is God’s initiative. It is divine action. The gift comes from above. The purification of Isaiah’s lips is wholly an act of God’s. He confesses his unworthiness and then receives purification by gift.

There is a lesson for all of us in this. It reminds us of our desperate need for cleansing, and our own utter inability to obtain this for ourselves. But I want to add something else here before we move on. Because for some of us, ‘overwhelmed by our own unworthiness’ is our *habitual* state. It’s not something that we need to be reminded of, something that we need to be called back to. It’s a bog we never get out of.

If that’s you, today, then hear again the words of the angel who touched that live coal to Isaiah’s mouth. *Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.*

We stand on the other side of the Cross. Jesus Christ has made the atoning sacrifice once and for all. So, if your faith is in him, hear once again these words. *Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.*

He has cleansed you for his service.

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

Here is the moment that Isaiah gives God his “yes”.

- But notice, he still doesn't know the content of the message he'll be given to deliver.
- He probably doesn't even know the target of the message.
- He certainly doesn't know the effect of the message, or how long he will be bound to his yes.

Effectively, he gives God his blank cheque. He says "yes" before reading the terms and conditions.

This is what I call a *dangerous prayer*. It's dangerous because there are no guardrails. It's a yes without knowing the consequences.

It's the 'yes' we give God when we pray 'your will be done'.

After our utter and primal 'no' in the face of God's holiness must come our unreserved, unqualified 'yes'.

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9 And the Lord said, "Go and say to this people:
'Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'

10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, lest they look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said:
"Until cities lie waste without inhabitant..."

This isn't a very encouraging start. We don't read these words at ordination services!

Essentially, Isaiah is being warned that his role is principally to expose the wilful obtuseness of his generation.

Now, it's important that we don't misunderstand these words – or Jesus' use of them in Mark 4 and Luke 8. It's important that we don't imagine that God is saying that he will actively *prevent* people from understanding what he wants of them. The overwhelming testimony of Scripture shows us that he is a speaking God who makes his ways plain to those who seek him.

But that's the key. *Those who seek him*.

There's a stock character in the Old Testament, and these verses are playing into that idea. The stock character is the Fool.

A Fool is someone who is culpably ignorant, who is wilfully obtuse. The one who says in his heart there is no God – or who says there is, but acts as if there isn't.

We see a worked example of just such a fool in the next chapter of Isaiah, when Ahaz obstinately refuses to receive the reassurance and guidance that the Lord offers him in his own situation of international threat.

Ahaz, incidentally, acts as a black mirror to Isaiah. Ahaz is far too overwhelmed by the task and far too indifferent to the glory and holiness of God.

The calling of a prophet means speaking unpopular truth, which will expose Fools for what they are – the wilfully obtuse of their generation.

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This is one reason why the call to such a role must be God's initiative and not ours. It is one reason why our primal *No!* – our *woe is me!* – must precede our *yes*. Otherwise there is the very real danger that we will speak from a sense of superiority; that we will imagine *we* are exempt from the prophetic criticism.

But these words *woe is me, for I am undone* – locate us as being as much in need of correction, as deserving of rebuke, as prone to wilful obtuseness as anyone we are called to address. Only once we have reckoned with our own undone-ness, our own folly, can we start to speak to Fools around us.

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So Isaiah is called to expose the wilful folly of his generation. But he is also told that he will not be successful, and that he will not be released from this charge until God's threatened warnings come to pass, when the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem – something that actually won't happen in his own lifetime. In other words, now you've signed up, Isaiah, here's the terms and conditions. You're in it for life.

Maybe it's perverse of me to say this, but I think we should find this encouraging. It should be encouraging for some of us who have been labouring long and faithfully for many years, but are not seeing the fruit of our labours. Because the fruit of our service is not in our hands. What *is* in our hands is how faithfully we discharge our duty; how faithfully we keep our promises; how faithfully we stick to our calling. The rest is up to God.

The indifference of others does not prove that the ministry is unfaithful, and nor does it mean that we have permission to lay it down.

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In every generation, God calls for a prophetic people to stand forth. And this prophetic people are a people who live in paradox.

- They are confident that God is on the throne, even while the kings and tyrants of the day take their stand against the Lord and his people.
- They are more overwhelmed by the holiness of God than by the task he is calling them to.
- They begin with a primal 'no', but go on to give him their unqualified 'yes'.
- They know they have no guarantee of success as the world measures it, but understand that stubborn obedience to the Lord and the task he has given them is the only measure of success that matters.

May our words spoken and our lives lived out testify to the new thing that God is doing as faithfully as Isaiah did. And when we see God in glory, as he did, may we hear the words 'well done, good and faithful servant.'

Questions for reflection

Believers Church Conference 2025

- How am I testifying by word and action to the word and purposes of God?
- What Foolishness am I called to expose – and in what ways am I the Fool?
- Are there times when I am more awed by the task or challenge than by the God who commissions me?
- Have I offered any dangerous prayers recently?
- What measures of success do I need to let go of?