

## Special Series

### the Call of God – Isaiah 2

## Prayer

Lord God may we, Your people, be faithful in our work of proclaiming the Gospel and sustaining Your Kingdom here on earth. May we be fearlessly active in its defence, vigorously effective in its growth, and unshakably confident in its eventual completion at Your coming again in glory. Lift our hearts we pray!  
AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*As you speak with other people, say silent prayer for them and the things you are talking about*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray about the world of sport** *Pray that sport will bring people together in a spirit of competitive fun instead of tribal aggression*
- *Give thanks to God for those whose work is to protect you*
- *Pray for Haiti as people try to rebuild shattered lives*

## Meditation

Jesus Christ, You break into our world with

Fresh insight which inspires us to new heights;  
Awesome visions by which we see the Father;  
Profound wisdom to strengthen our minds;  
Divine energy which breaks through barriers;  
Amazing beauty through which we find joy;  
Superb kindness to transform relationships;  
Incredible sensitivity which values all life;  
Astonishing bravery by which evil is defeated;

Jesus Christ, You are our inspiration!

## Bible passage – Isaiah 6:9-13

<sup>9</sup> He said, 'Go, and tell this people:

'Listen so that you hear,  
but do not understand;

Look so that you see,  
but do not perceive.'

<sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people unreceptive,

dull their ears,  
and cover their eyes;

lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears;

then understand for themselves,  
and turn to receive its healing.'

<sup>11</sup> Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?'

And he said:

'Until cities lie ruined  
without inhabitants,  
the houses lack people,  
and the land is completely laid waste.'

<sup>12</sup> When the LORD abandons the people,  
and in the midst of the land  
the greater part will be desolate.

<sup>13</sup> If there is but a tenth part remaining in it  
and it turns, it will be burned.  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
which leaves a stump  
when it is felled:

The holy seed is the stump.

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## Bible Study

### Review

Isaiah 6 is very famous passage of Scripture. In verses 1 to 8, we read the first part of Isaiah's call, and he responds to the Lord's call in a remarkable and moving way, '*Here am I, send me*' (6:8). In the second half of this great chapter, the Lord reveals to Isaiah what he must now prophesy, but it is an astonishing, and almost incomprehensible message, and we are mostly confused by its meaning, especially the first part (6:9,10). Nevertheless, we will discover that these extraordinary words are not only important, they are essential to God's plan for the salvation of the world. If you find this hard to believe, then remember that verses 9 and 10 are quoted frequently in the New Testament (e.g. Matt 13:10-15, John 12:39-41 and Acts 28:26-7); the Gospel writers clearly understood that this message from the Lord to Isaiah was a crucial passage of Scripture.

The Hebrew text of this passage is very difficult and almost untranslatable. For years, scholars reckon that those who heard it first changed the passage because it was too scandalous! However, my translation attempts to keep an eye on the logic of the wider story of Isaiah, and the evidence of what God says to Isaiah throughout his prophetic ministry.

Up to this point, Isaiah's prophecies have been similar to his contemporaries. His message typically passes judgement on Israel for her sins yet longs for God to show mercy, and he demonstrates a passionate belief that God will do something new to redeem His people (e.g. chapter 4). However, God now commissions Isaiah to deliver a unique message about how He will deal with Israel, and he gives Isaiah an essential clue about this in the words '*the holy seed is the stump*' (6:13). We may not easily understand what this means, but the more we read Isaiah, the more we will realise the importance of this prophecy, and why God marked out Isaiah as a unique prophet by giving him this message.

There are two parts to the prophecy. Firstly, we read the Lord's message of absolute justice; Israel cannot and will not repent of her sins, and words of prophecy will only make her more unrepentant (6:9,10)! The news for Israel is bleak, for she is destined to be punished for her sins by exile, and is unable to receive her heritage of covenant blessings! God has drawn a cloud over Israel to dull her sight and muffle her ears, and she is unable to receive healing and forgiveness from God. What an extraordinary message! The Lord told Isaiah that his message would not be received, but he must still give it!

Yet it is likely that Isaiah understood what the message meant, and he expected nothing less from a God of absolute justice! But this did not stop Isaiah from being heartbroken and asking '*How long?*' (6:11). In answer to this, the lord went on to reveal that punishment would last until His people endured exile and Jerusalem was utterly destroyed (6:11). More significantly, Isaiah was told that beyond this destruction, the Lord God would save a significant '*tenth part remaining*' (6:13); so despite her punishment, Israel held within her a small but significant '*holy seed*' (6:13) that would be the hope of salvation!

We are so used to the message of God's love that we find it hard to appreciate how revolutionary it was for Isaiah to prophecy as he did. Historically, this message was born out of the heart of ancient prophets who were led by the Holy Spirit to perceive this truth, and Isaiah was the prophet who first began to prophecy how this would be done. Starting here with the message given to him at his 'call', Isaiah continued to prophecy about the coming of this holy seed as a child 'God with us' (7:14), as an infant king (9:6), and ultimately as a suffering servant (53:1f.). Although it is hard for us to understand Isaiah 6, God's call to Isaiah was to tell the people what God would do; He would pursue justice, but through the 'holy seed', bring a saviour.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Israel's misunderstanding due to sin, and lack of healing
- Isaiah's prophecy of ruin and exile
- What will be left of Israel for God to use?

### Going Deeper

Looking carefully, we find that the Lord said two things to Isaiah, firstly in verses 9 and 10, and secondly in verse 11. The last two verses are Isaiah's prophetic comment on what he has heard, in which he reaffirms

his belief that the Lord will bring salvation to His people not by re-establishing the past, but only through a new 'holy seed'.

### ***Israel's misunderstanding due to sin, and lack of healing***

When Isaiah replied to the Lord by saying 'Here am I, send me!' (6:8) he could not have known that he would be given the most impossible of tasks, which was to tell the remaining people of God in Judea and Jerusalem that their relationship with God was irretrievably damaged. The first message God gave Isaiah for the people of Judah is in the second part of verse 9 and also verse 10. At first, these words read as if God is instructing His people to search for Him but they will not find Him (6:9b)! How can God be so heartless? The Lord then goes on to tell Isaiah to confuse the people so that they do not know what He is doing, and it is not His intention to heal them from their sickness! It seems very 'out of character' for God even though the people had sinned.

We might expect God to announce a powerful deed or sign to draw the people back to Him, like He had done many times before in times past, as with Moses (Ex 34:27-35) or Samuel (1 Sam 7:7-11), but those times had passed. Before God could do anything to deal with the sins of His people, He had to make it clear that if the people persisted in them, then they broke their covenant relationship with Him, and they could not simply turn back again 'to receive healing' (6:10) as if there was not a problem; there was.

If we are to understand what God was saying, however, we must recognise that these words were not an announcement of judgement, but a prophetic description of what was going on in Isaiah's day. The people were 'listening but not hearing', in other words, they were attending their worship and religious ceremonies, but not knowing what they meant nor being receptive to God. In the vision (6:1-8), Isaiah heard the Lord calling out 'who will go for us?' but no-one replied except Isaiah. Who knows how many other people had been called by God but failed to respond because they were spiritually deaf? It is said today that 'history is written by the victors', but the history of God's salvation is written by the 'God inspired' deeds of those who have responded to His call!

When Jesus used this passage of scripture (Matt 13:10f.), he used it to explain why the common people who heard Him listened to the parables he taught and appreciated them, but did not understand them. In fact, they explained how Jesus was bringing into existence the eternal Kingdom of God in their midst. Something of God's power was stirring in the world around them through Jesus and the people did not perceive it; just as in Isaiah's day, when God was beginning to set in motion a plan of salvation for the world which his own covenant people did not recognise. Following this revelation, Isaiah knew this, but the people as a whole did not. It was Isaiah's job to announce it.

### ***Isaiah's prophecy of ruin and exile***

Isaiah's reaction to what he had been told was to ask a question; 'how long, O Lord?' Isaiah wanted to know how long it would be before God would act. The words which the Lord said were chilling, speaking of a time after war had laid waste the land of Judah and Jerusalem.

It is understandable that Isaiah should have received these words, and they confirmed what Isaiah had already prophesied about the coming of war as God's means of cleansing the land (see 5:25-30), but we must remember that Isaiah spoke at a time when the Assyrian hordes were gathering to the north of Judah and Israel, threatening both nations. In reality, the Assyrians invaded and destroyed the north (721BC), but Judah was saved (see Isaiah 36-39). The word God gave to Isaiah about invasion and exile (6:11) did not come true until many years later and Judah was invaded by Babylon. However, we must be clear that at the time when Isaiah received his call it was around 740 BC, and more than a century would pass before Jerusalem itself was decimated in the manner this prophecy described.

It is vital that we learn the lesson that God sometimes works in a timeframe beyond our experience and we must have the faith to hold on to what He tells us even though we may not live to see the answers. What we do and say may affect future generations, and we should not imagine that God gives prophetic words just for the present.

### ***What will be left of Israel for God to use?***

Some scriptures indicate through their editing that they believe the Lord's words continue until the end of verse 13. However, the Hebrew suggests that the Lord's answer to Isaiah's question is contained in verse 11, and from verse 12 it reads more naturally as if Isaiah speaks (prophetically) after hearing what the Lord has to say. He concludes that when the Lord comes to destroy the Promised Land, the very sign of His covenant relationship with His people, then He will do so completely, so that 'if a tenth part remains ... it will be burned' (6:13). The only hope for God's people will come through the way that life springs up again on the land after any fire or drought or disaster, which is through seed, the 'holy seed' (6:13).

Verse 13 is notorious as one of the most difficult passages of Hebrew in the Old Testament. The original text does not make literal sense at all; an attempt to provide a literal reading would be something like this; 'if yet

in a tenth part, it turns, it will be for burning; like the terebinth or like the oak which is felled – a monument of it. The seed of the holy will be a stump.’ The only way that scholars or translators can arrive at meaningful English (or any other translation) is to make assumptions about what may have been meant, and I have taken the simplest route to this (though your version of the Bible may read quite differently).

The idea behind the verse is relatively simple (see above), but we should remember that the tribe of Judah is sometimes referred to as a ‘tenth’ of all Israel (not counting Levi, the tribe of priests, and leaving out the tribe of Simeon which is often included with Judah). If this is taken into account, then it seems that Isaiah was specifically concerned that even if the northern tribes of Israel were invaded by Assyria, it was his opinion that the time would come when God’s justice would fall on Judah and Jerusalem, and all that would be left would be ‘holy seed’, like a ‘stump’.

## Application

The amazing conclusion of this passage is that the only hope for the salvation of God’s people (and through them the whole world) is through this ‘holy seed’. The scriptural word ‘seed’ may seem strange to us because it is often used to refer to a ‘descendant’ or ‘a child born’; as in the expression ‘the seed of Abraham’. So although Isaiah 6 is full of talk about the devastation of the Promised Land and of cities, and the exile of people from Jerusalem, this ending is incredibly dramatic. What does it mean, how would Isaiah have understood it, and how might we understand it? The whole of Isaiah 6, with its spectacular call of Isaiah and the affirmation of his prophetic call is remarkable enough; but these last few words are more important than the rest! They indicate to us that in the light of what God said to Isaiah, it was revealed to Him that a new ‘holy descendant’ of God would be the ‘stump’ from which the new Israel would grow, now that both Israel and Judah had shown themselves to be corrupted by sin. In coming days we will see how this is born out in what happened next to Isaiah.

From our perspective, this conclusion points us to Christ. Isaiah had much to learn about the ‘holy seed’, but his prophecy reminds us that God sometimes gives one person the essential ‘seed’ or ‘germ’ of an idea about His intentions for the future, for this message is found nowhere else in the scriptural records of Isaiah’s day. Consequently, we should realise that if we remain faithful to our Lord, then He may reveal something to us which is important for all God’s people and for the future. Too often, we assume that our own lives are insignificant; when in God’s great plan of things, what we do for Him is important. When the church is functioning well, we learn to treasure what God does for and says to each individual, because it may be something deeply important. Let us respect each other accordingly and be open to hear the ‘seed’ of His Word through whomsoever He wishes to give it.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Read what Jesus says in Matthew 13:10-17 and discuss this in your group in the light of this passage.
2. To what extent does verse 10 describe people today?
3. Isaiah prophesied about God’s new beginning through a ‘holy seed’. What did this mean to Isaiah, and what does it mean to us?

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *Barriers that prevent people from coming close to God*
- *God’s eternal plan of salvation*
- *The remnant*

### **Personal comments by author**

*I find this to be a fascinating passage of scripture; moreover, it is one that has been glossed over by too many. Even today, commentaries skip by this part of Isaiah 6, as if it is just a rather annoying addendum to the story of Isaiah’s call. In fact, without this message, Isaiah’s call is irrelevant. Isaiah was called to deliver a tough message about judgement, but out of this would come his great prophecies of the coming king (chps. 9,11) and suffering servant (ch. 53). Like Isaiah, I have found that when I follow through those things that seem unimportant, then I find God’s gold!*

## ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *What was it like when you first felt the presence of God and received His Word spoken to you? If it is a long time since you knew this, then seek the Lord in prayer and ask Him to reveal what He would say to you. He is always willing to engage with us, that is, if we are open.*
  - *The Lord has words of judgement for today, but how does the Lord judge the world, or His people today? Think about this, and talk about it with others at your church.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Thank You Lord Jesus, for the many ways in which You support us. We appreciate Your help and we hope to learn from You, not so that we do not need Your help again, but so that You can teach us more and lead us on to greater things. Fulfil Your purposes in us we pray: AMEN

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