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Isaiah 6:1-8

First Message

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THE BIRTH OF A PROPHET: A HOLY BURNING

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

Today I'd like to take you on a journey to a very special place. If you will come, I promise you will never be the same.

I have a passion for travel. If I could write my own airline ticket, I would go to the Swiss Alps. The majesty of those snow-capped peaks seems to draw me closer to God. This love of travel took root in my heart about twenty years ago when I studied in Florence, Italy, for a time. With three-day weekends every week, we had many opportunities to travel about Europe. On my first weekend there, several of my fellow-students suggested we visit Rome. I reminded them that we were just a few hours away from the Swiss Alps, but no one bought my idea. So on Friday night I took a train, alone, from Florence, and arrived at Zermatt, Switzerland, at the foot of the Matterhorn, the following morning. I skied on a treeless glacier for two days, with the majestic Matterhorn as a backdrop. The woman who owned the pension where I stayed told me that her late husband had been a guide for the Matterhorn, and suggested I return during climbing season in the summer to scale the mountain. I thought about her words later that year, and decided that I would go back to Zermatt the following summer to climb the Matterhorn.

On July 9th, 1970, I returned to the pension around 3 o'clock in the afternoon and announced to her, "Here I am!" She replied, "Oh, we have no time to spare. We must go right now!" We rented my climbing equipment, and before I knew it I found myself alone on a chair lift, heading up the first stage of the mountain. A breathtaking view of the Matterhorn lay before me. Then my eye caught a glimpse of a graveyard below where the bodies of those whom the mountain had conquered lie buried. My excitement quickly changed to fear. I later learned that in the week following my climb, four others would be added to that list.

When I got off the chair lift, there was still a three-hour hike to the base hut where I would spend the night. This was at 12,000 feet, and already I was feeling altitude sickness. I managed to hide my queasy stomach symptoms as I met the other climbers. Our guide told us we were fortunate to be climbing on what they expected would be a cloudless day. This was a rare window of opportunity, the first in 88 days, to climb the mountain on a clear day. One of the other climbers, who came from Riverside here in California, told me he had been in training for the climb, and had scaled several peaks in the days just before our climb. I must have looked a bit concerned, because the guide told me there was a halfway hut where I could stay if I decided I couldn't go on. My initial excitement began to turn to fear. As I lay down to sleep, already exhausted and expecting a 3 a.m. call to climb the Matterhorn, I began to wonder if I was acting presumptuously.

The Scriptures tell us that God lives in a heavenly temple on a cloud-covered mountain. Many have acted presumptuously and tried ascend the mountain only to perish when they came face-to-face with the weight of God's unbearable holiness. But occasionally, God in his grace opens a small window of opportunity so that an individual may ascend that mountain and stand in his presence. Every prophet in the history of Israel had that opportunity. That is why these men were so different from others. They had seen God in his majesty and glory,

and the experience so changed their hearts that their speech was filled with luminosity and power to bring forth the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. Having taken the journey, ascended the mountain, and seen the living God, they were irrevocably changed.

Did you know that the experience of the prophets of old is to be the experience of every saint? The book of Acts says that with the gift of the Spirit poured out on the day of Pentecost, all Christians in some sense are prophets (Acts 2:17). Will you ascend the mountain with me? Today, more than ever, we need prophets, men and women who have seen God and who speak and act differently. We need them in our church, our neighborhoods, our workplace, our nation.

When we undertake this journey, we will find that it has four stages. Our text, Isaiah 6:1-8, begins by giving the context and the date of the prophet's vision:

In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord... (NASB)

Judah had known no king like Uzziah since the time of Solomon. He became king at the age of 16, and reigned for 52 years (792-740 BC). Unlike the wicked kings in the north, Uzziah, according to 2 Chronicles 26:4-5, "did right in the sight of the Lord according to all that his father Amaziah had done. And he continued to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of God; as long as he sought the Lord, God prospered him." Uzziah's kingdom prospered in two ways. Politically, Judah saw great expansion during this man's reign. He had an elite army of over 300,000 troops, commanded by 2,600 military officers. His army was equipped with the best technology and was highly mobile. Again, Chronicles tells us, "Moreover, Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, body armor, bows and sling stones. And in Jerusalem he made engines of war [like our missile sites] invented by skillful men to be on the towers and on the corners, for the purpose of shooting arrows and great stones" (2 Chr 26:14-15).

Whenever Uzziah fought, Scripture says, "God helped him." In the west, he conquered the Philistine cities, broke down their chief defenses and built up his own cities in the conquered areas. To the east, Ammon came under his control and paid him tribute. To the south, he conquered the Edomites. His greatest achievement, perhaps, was the rebuilding of the city of Elath. With political expansion came economic prosperity. In the Negev, he built forts to secure the water supply. He brought Arabian trade by the sea coast, secured the mineral wealth of the Rift Valley, and developed agriculture in the Judean hills. Jerusalem was heavily fortified and enjoyed a great period of peace. Second Chronicles says of King Uzziah, "Hence his fame spread afar, for he was marvelously helped...until he was strong" (26:15).

Until... When Uzziah became strong, then he became proud: "But when he became strong, his heart was so lifted up that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the Lord his God, for he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense" (2 Chr 26:16). Puffed up in his pride and arrogance, Uzziah thought he could enter into the presence of God and take God's holy fire unto himself. He was challenged by the priest Azariah and eighty others for dishon-

oring the Lord. Uzziah became angry in the midst of his worship, says Chronicles. Here is what happened next: “Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead. . . . And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the Lord” (2 Chr 26:19-21). Leprosy was the only legacy left by the great King Uzziah. He had acted presumptuously by daring to presume on the holiness of God. His son Jotham learned by his father’s example. Scripture says of him, “He did not enter into the house of the Lord.” Jotham in turn was succeeded by his wicked son Ahaz. It was the end of an age. Gone was the era of prosperity and peace. A time of war and ruin followed. Israel went to war with Syria, and later, Assyria attacked the kingdom and almost brought about the annihilation of Israel as a nation.

There we have the context of the vision of Isaiah. When our dreams fall apart, when all human hope fades, that is when we get a vision of heaven. “In the year of King Uzziah’s death. . . mine eyes have seen THE King!” says Isaiah. In the midst of despair we are especially ripe for a revelation from heaven.

Let us look then at the vision which Isaiah had.

I. Consumed by the glory of God (6:1-4)

A. A vision of the glory of God (6:1b)

The prophet says,

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

Where is Isaiah? He is not where King Uzziah was, which was in the earthly temple. Isaiah is transported to the heavenly mountain, into the heavenly temple. He is probably standing outside the Holy Place, and the veil shielding the Holy of Holies is parted, thus permitting him to see, not the Ark, which was a symbol of God’s throne, but a real throne upon which is seated the Holy God. Isaiah is as close to God as a man can get, a place filled with the raw edge of terror where humanity dare not tread.

And what does he see? If you were to have a vision of God today, what do you think you would see? Isaiah sees two things. First, God’s sovereignty. God is seated high, lofty and exalted. While earth’s throne is vacated, with tumult and despair on every hand, the immortal one is seated, undisturbed and untouched by earth’s changes. Then Isaiah sees God’s glory. The train of God’s robe fills the temple. There is no room here for man’s glory. No one dares wear a Super Bowl ring, no one displays his honors in the temple of God. “The train of his robe suffocates every human pretension” (Bruce Waltke).

When we reached the summit of the Matterhorn at eight o’clock in the morning, we were greeted with a 360-degree view of the majestic Alps. Below lay the foothills and valleys of Switzerland. Every human care we had down at the foot of the mountain quickly faded; such earthly concerns cannot make their way up to the summit. Everything was quiet and still. Southward lay the great glacier, with all of its massive weight and glory pushing its way down the valley. The point is, the glacier was making its presence, its weight, its glory, known down in the valley below. Isn’t that the vision of God that we need today? We may be at war soon in the Middle East. Closer to home, the University of California has suffered two terrible tragedies, death through fire and gunshot, in the past few weeks. Closer still to home, your business may be failing, your marriage may be falling apart. You might have had a week like I just had, where anxiety and a sense of inadequacy almost paralyzed me. That is when we need to see the Lord, seated in his temple, undisturbed and untouched by the turbulent circumstances of earth.

Next, Isaiah has a vision of the glory of the Lord’s servants, the seraphim.

B. A vision of the glory of his servants (6:2-4)

Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

The seraphim represent the first incarnation of life next to the throne of God. Their six wings represent the number of man, and I think they depict the righteous character we are to display when we are in right relationship to God. We can see this in the very essence of these beings. The word seraphim means “fiery” (see Exod 3:1-6; 13:21; 19:18; Lev 10:1-2; Num 11:1-2; 1 Kgs 18:24). There is a burning holiness about them that purifies and consumes everything that is impure. Fire translates mass into energy; these beings possess a burning holiness for God.

Second, we see that their character is one of humility. First, toward God: “with two [wings] he covered his face.” Just as the human eye has respect for the sun, and dares not look at it, the seraphim dare not look upon the glory of God. And second, toward themselves: “with two he covered his feet.” The seraphim demonstrated a conscious humility, a modesty toward their own creatureliness. Our culture is dominated by sports. We are taught to gloat in victory—to spike the ball, to taunt the opposition. At the YMCA where I exercise, the whole place is covered with wall to wall mirrors to help us gloat in our creatureliness (some of us, at least). But not so the seraphim. They demonstrate a conscious humility.

Next, we see that the function of the seraphim is to serve and to praise God. They are all wings and voice, perfectly ready to praise and to serve. “With two [wings] he flew”: these beings are ready in an instant to obey the divine will of God. They are always and instantly available. And with their voice they praise God in an antiphonal chorus of praise. “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.”

“Lord of Hosts” refers to the commander of all the armies of nature, of angels and nations. The fact that they repeat the word “holy” three times suggests the strongest superlative in Hebrew. God alone is holy. Do not give the title to anyone else. This chorus so moved Isaiah that 26 times in his prophecy he uses the title for God, “The Holy One of Israel.” “Holiness” in Hebrew thought always refers to ethics. It is not referring to ritual purity, but to ethical behavior. To oppress the helpless was to profane God’s holy name (Jer 34:16); likewise, to make use of a prostitute profaned the name of God. God is very different and distinct from us, not only in essence but in character. He is unique, set apart. “Awesome” is a descriptive word which we hear used a lot today, but we should never use that word to describe anyone or anything but God. He alone is holy, he alone is awesome.

So the seraphim glory in God’s transcendence.

They also glory in his immanence: “The whole earth is full of His glory.” Not only is the whole temple filled with God’s glory, the seraphim have the eye of faith to see that his glory is in the whole earth. Right at that point in history there was political chaos and human disillusionment in Israel. War was about to break out, idolatry was rampant in the land, yet the seraphim sang, “The whole earth is full of His glory.” And as they sang these words back and forth, “the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.”

If their antiphonal chorus shook the foundations of the heavenly temple, what shall it do when it comes to earth?

This is how we are to be in our humanity. We are to be a humble people, ready to serve the living God, spreading his power by praising him in our speech and song. This is the way we are to lay hold of God's power.

We had an example of this in our church this past summer. Earlier this year, the Lord put it upon the hearts of two of our members, Earle and Jolyn Canty, to adopt a child from one of the many orphanages in Romania. They decided to go to that country by faith to see if they could rescue one child. Before he left, Earle told me he had never felt more inadequate. We prayed that the God who had parted the Red Sea would part the sea of administration, corruption and evil and give them success in Romania. Just before they left, they heard sung here in church the hymn, "Our God is an Awesome God, He reigns from heaven above." This is the song that Earle sang to himself every time an obstacle came in his path while he was in Romania. And there were many obstacles—from riots in Bucharest, trying to find the mothers of the children, dealing with threats against the life of one mother, being hassled and finally delivered from a corrupt lawyer, AIDS testing, fingerprinting, visas, FBI clearances, etc. The process usually takes two or three months, and thousands of dollars, but Earle and Jolyn returned with little Samuel Mihi after two weeks in Romania. God had parted the Red Sea and given them a son.

The first step in the birth of a prophet is to be consumed by the glory of God.

II. Broken by one's own depravity (6:5)

A. The cry of despair

Having seen the sovereignty of God, his mighty rule over creation, the nations and the angels, having seen his transcendence and yet his immanence, Isaiah is suddenly and brutally made aware of himself.

**Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."**

"Woe" was the word used by the prophets when they pronounced judgment to someone. This is not referring to some temporary setback. Isaiah is admitting that he is totally undone. This is the same reaction the apostle Peter had when he said to Jesus on one occasion, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8).

B. The depth of despair

The word "ruined" is a stronger Hebrew word than the word describing what happened to Uzziah, who was "cut off" from the house of the Lord, smitten with leprosy because of his presumptive arrogance. Isaiah's words, "I am a man of unclean lips," penetrate right to the heart. He was in utter despair, and the whole nation was in the same condition. There was nothing of eternal value inherent in themselves. All their self-righteousness had to be abandoned.

Despair is what confronts our modern existentialists when they finally come to terms with what they say is the meaninglessness of life. This is why many of them take their own lives. But Isaiah's condition is sadder still. He sees that there is meaning, perfection, righteousness and holiness, but he has no part in it. That is a cause for even deeper despair. We are hearing this cry of despair all over this valley today. This is quite a change from the days when everyone seemed to be enjoying the fast-paced, materialistic lifestyle of this area. We have buried our past, but, like toxic waste, parts of it are now beginning to seep to the surface. We have become enslaved to patterns that have gone

on for years and years, and people are beginning to grieve as a result. Christians need to capitalize on this because it is biblical to grieve, as Isaiah did, over sin. Modern religions, of course, don't teach this. The New Age movement says men and women are divine beings. But the Scripture teaches that only God dwells in ethical purity. When we are confronted with his burning holiness, we realize we have no part in him. If we were to see him, we too would cry out, with Isaiah, "Woe is me!"

This is how I have felt on several occasions in the past few years when I have come face to face with seraphim like one of our missionaries, Eli Fangidae, in Timor, Indonesia. This man has a burning passion for holiness that is simple and pure. Once when I stood next to the founder of the Christian group we visit in Romania, I felt the same emotion Isaiah felt. When I hear these people singing the hymns which this man wrote, I feel like dust on the scales. I return home to find that my identity now is that I am a parent of a teenager! I used to be a pastor to teenagers and their parents, and my advice to parents was, "Hang in there; you'll survive all this." But now I find myself becoming the stereotypical parent of a teenager—over-reacting, too harsh, critical, and negative. This is especially troubling to me after I have just had fellowship with these wonderful saints.

This is how Isaiah felt when he saw the Lord, the King of kings. There may be some here today who have never wept over their own sin, but you cannot be a prophet until you do so. The problem with the church in America is that many people are seeking to be prophets, but they are self-righteous. Though their criticism of the nation—that we are a people of unclean lips, and that we have abandoned what we once held to be absolutes—is on target, their combative, self-righteous spirit produces not ministry, but backlash.

Isaiah, on the other hand, had no place for such self-righteousness. His vision of the glory of God revealed to him insight into own depravity. The chasm between God and man was too great to cross; no human endeavor can construct a means to make that journey. There is no hope for those who remain separated from God; they will be crushed into non-existence by his holiness.

But suddenly, God in his grace acts in behalf of Isaiah.

III. Cleansed by the Spirit of God (6:6-7)

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is atoned for."

A. God bridges the chasm

Isaiah is neither seeking nor expecting a pardon, but a seraphim flies to him, and he is touched by God. Instead of destroying him, leaving him in despair, God comes to him and changes him by his holy fire, that he might dwell where God is. God doesn't reveal himself to us to destroy us, but to redeem us.

B. The Spirit of God brings cleansing

"This burning coal is the symbol both of the purification of blood and the fire of the Spirit that enabled Isaiah to speak with luminosity and explosiveness" (Bruce Waltke). Unlike Uzziah, who grasped God's holy fire, bypassing the work of the priest, God sends a burning coal from his altar to cleanse Isaiah. Instead of destroying him as it did Uzziah, the fiery coal purifies him. The difference lay in how these men got to the mountaintop. Uzziah presumptuously sought to do this for himself, but Isaiah, seeing the holiness of God, immediately recognized his need for someone else to do this for him.

In the same way the Holy Spirit takes the work of the altar of the cross (God's holy fire) and imparts it to our lives. This is entirely a work of grace. God views this as atonement. It is covered, so he doesn't see our sin, and we are able to stand in his presence. Our iniquity is taken away. Thus it is not merely forgiveness, but an entire change in our being that is in question here. Our internal life is changed so that God may dwell with us.

It is apparent in Scripture that what God did for Isaiah he intended to do for all of Israel. This was fulfilled at Pentecost, when following the cross and the resurrection, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all the disciples. Tongues as of fire appeared over their heads, moving the apostle Peter to quote the words of the prophet Joel, "My Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh, and you will all prophesy." When we are born spiritually into this holy nation, the Holy Spirit takes the work that was done at the altar of God's burning righteousness and touches our hearts, affecting our speech, making us all prophets. It is no accident that the Greek word for "saint" in the New Testament is derived from the same root as the word for "holiness." A saint is not someone who is special, but rather one who has been touched, by grace, by the burning holiness of God, and is set apart unto ethical purity.

Living in the city as we do so saps our spiritual life that we sometimes wonder if we ever will experience heavenly sensations. We wonder if the clouds will ever clear so that we can behold the mountain and have a sense of God's burning holiness.

One man did. Richard Rolle, writing in 1343, described this experience as the "Fire of Love." Here is what he wrote,

The time I first felt my heart begin to warm—I have been amazed more than I am able to say. I felt it truly, not simply in my imagination, but just as though my heart was burning with a physical fire. I marvelled, you may be sure, at how this burning in my soul leapt up, and at its unanticipated comfort. It was so vivid an experience that often I put my hand against my chest just to see if I could feel any cause for the heat outwardly! But once I knew that it was purely a matter of inward, spiritual nature, and that the burning sensation was not from carnal love or concupiscence, I realized it had to be a gift from my Creator. Accordingly I was glad, and melted with a desire for a greater experience of love, especially on account of the inflow of the sweetest pleasure and spiritual delight with which that spiritual flame comforted my mind. Before this comforting warmth came to me, shedding its sense of devotion within, I frankly believed that no such experience could come in our present state of exile, for truly it enflames the soul just as if a real fire were burning there.¹

Isaiah had a vision of the holiness of God. This gave him insight into his own depravity, and bore testimony to him that the chasm between them was too great to cross. But then, just as his despair was most profound, God in his grace took a burning coal from his holy fire to cleanse him.

In gratitude for his cleansing, Isaiah dedicates himself to a life of service.

IV. Available to serve the Living God (6:8)

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

A. Able to hear the voice of God

For the first time in our text, God speaks. Man cannot hear that voice until he has first seen God, been plunged into despair, and then been touched by his cleansing. Then, as never before, one is able to hear the word of God. How many times have we heard the testimony of people who say they had never heard (with spiritual understanding) the word of God before, and then suddenly it was opened to them for the first time. Having thus been cleansed, Isaiah is now able to hear voice of God.

B. Available to serve the Living God

Then Isaiah is taken to the court, where he hears God's angels and sees God's administration being carried out. God asks, "Who will go for us?" It's interesting that Isaiah is not named here. He is neither addressed nor coerced, yet he responds, "*Hineni!* Here am I. Send me." Notice, he is neither directly addressed nor coerced. "Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into non-existence by the very holiness of God, and having then received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God's service?" (John Oswalt). There was a burning in his soul that would not be quenched, and thus he leaps at the opportunity to serve God. If you are serving the Lord out of a sense of duty, or if you feel coerced to do so, go back down the mountain; that is not the biblical model for Christian service.

That is the birth of a prophet. It begins with death, which opens the door to vision, which leads to despair, which opens the door to cleansing, and cleansing opens the door to recognizing the possibility of service, and that leading to an offering of the entire self without reservation.

Now as we come to the Lord's Table, I ask you to consider where are you in your spiritual journey? As you recognize your position, ask the Lord Jesus to feed you at that point. Some of you may be like Uzziah. You have been coming to church for years, but you have been acting presumptuously, taking God's holy fire unto yourself without benefit of the priesthood. You have become a leper inside. Others of you are anxious. You need to see this vision of God in his glory, exalted on high, ruling in his sovereignty. Others of you may never have wept about your sin. You need to grieve. Others of you have never experienced cleansing in your heart. You need God's touch of grace, then you will freely serve, as Charles Wesley wrote,

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Still the small inward voice I hear
That whispers all my sins forgiven;
Still the atoning blood is near
That quenched the wrath of hostile heaven.
I feel the life his wounds impart;
I feel the Saviour in my heart.

1. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love* (ca. 1343), in *The Law of Love: English Spirituality in the Age of Wyclif* (ed. David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 183-184.