

Isaiah 6 - Isaiah's Commission

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[0:00] Morning, everyone. If you want to turn to page 691, if you haven't left it open. In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne. And! the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings, with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.

And they were calling to one another, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke.

Woe to me, I cried. I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom should I send, and whom will go for us? And I said, Here I am, send me.

He said, Go and tell this people, Be ever hearing, but never understanding. Be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused.

[1:39] Make their ears dull, and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Then I said, For how long, Lord? And he answered, Until the cities lie ruined, and without inhabitant. Until the houses are left deserted, and the fields ruined and ravaged.

Until the Lord has sent everyone far away, and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.

Amen. Thanks for reading for us, Faith. Let's pray as we come to God's Word. Let's pray. Please, Lord, we come now to your Word as hungry people come to a dinner table.

We long to feast on what you say to us. We want to hear you. We want to learn from you. We want our hearts to be nourished with the truth of your Word. We want to hear of your glory and your grace and your goodness.

[2:53] But there are so many things in our lives and our hearts that distract us. And so we pray for your help now. We know we need your Spirit's help. So please, bless us. Be with us.

Meet with us, we ask. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Like I was saying in the family Bible slot, I think that opening sentence of chapter 6 is designed for you to contrast the fading glory of the dying King Uzziah and the unfading brilliance of the God Yahweh, who is still on his throne.

Uzziah is dead. The Lord lives. And like I said, Uzziah was one of Israel's most significant kings. He'd been on the throne for 52 years. He'd fortified Jerusalem.

He'd defeated foreign armies. And now he is dead. And the Lord lives. Human power is toppled. Divine power is still in place.

And we have lots of ground to cover this morning. And so I don't want to spend ages on this, but I think it's worth just stopping even there for a moment and thinking what this has to say to us this morning. I don't know what's gone on in your week.

[4:05] Maybe there is something that has happened to your week or your world this week that has shaken you. Maybe your job wobbled this week. Maybe your health failed.

Maybe you didn't get the grades that you were hoping to get. Maybe your children let you down. Maybe a relationship with someone has crashed. Maybe the thing that you were hoping for didn't come to pass. Well, you need to know, don't you, in the world where those glories fade and pass, there is the unfading brilliance of the God of glory.

The Lord lives. The Lord's throne has gone nowhere. And more than just the sort of the contrast like that, it is almost as if, in the way that Isaiah puts it, it is almost as if the death of Isaiah actually sets the scene for seeing the glory of God.

It is as if because Isaiah has died, the glory of God is more visible to him. And so for you this morning, it might be that your Isaiah is dead, whatever that might be.

And so for you this morning, our prayer is that the glory and brilliance of God is even clearer and sweeter because of that.

[5 : 16] The glory of God is dead, just like it was for Isaiah. So let's have a look at the detail and notice firstly a glorious God in verses one to four. A glorious God. The passage really neatly divides into three.

So you've got a glorious God in verses one to four. Then you have Isaiah recognizing his sinfulness. And then at the end from verse eight onwards, you have his call to ministry. So let's think first about the glorious God in verses one to four.

The unmissable point here is the great majesty and glory of God. But just let's break it down. Notice first the size of God. I'm not sure that size is quite the right word, but notice that Isaiah is in the temple when he sees this vision of God.

And what you need to know is that the temple is massive, right? It's the largest building in the fortress city of Jerusalem. It's a wonder of ancient engineering, a design that is defied every other building in the city.

It is immense. But as Isaiah sees God in the temple, notice it is just the train. Literally, it is the hem of his robe which fills the temple.

[6 : 20] In other words, as big and majestic and as glorious as this huge building is, it cannot contain God. It cannot even contain the edge of the rim of his robe.

Now, of course, God doesn't have a body, does he? And he doesn't therefore wear a robe or really have a size. It's really that the vision is trying to communicate not so much what God looks like, so much as what the invisible God himself is like.

And the message to Isaiah is, God is very big. So big that he makes the greatest of human efforts look small and pathetic. So, like, God would absolutely dominate your workplace.

He would completely overshadow your school. He would cloud all of our city. Just the smallest edge of the rim of his clothing would be enough for you. God's glorious size is incomprehensible, isn't it? And so when Isaiah says he saw God, he doesn't mean, I saw everything of God that there was to see. That would be impossible. No, he says, I saw the edge of the bottom of the edge of the rim of his robe.

[7 : 27] And it filled everything I could see. I couldn't see anything else. Notice next the seraphim. They're mentioned in verse 2, aren't they?

These are the angelic beings living in the spiritual reality that lives alongside this world. We're told that they have six wings. They cover their faces with two of them because they themselves cannot look on God.

Notice that, right? They are sinless in perfection, these angels. And yet, despite that, God is too glorious for them to look at. Next, Isaiah says that they're covering their feet.

Again, that is symbolic. I think it means that they're not going anywhere on their own orders. They're not doing anything outside of what God commands. They will not do what they want to do. The final pair of wings are used for flight, so that they can swiftly carry out the instructions of this glorious God they serve.

It's interesting, isn't it, that every detail of these creatures that you're given is designed to point you away from themselves and to God. Their glory, if you like, the glory of these seraphim, which I would imagine is absolutely overwhelming if you saw them, their glory is really just sort of refracted glory or reflected glory from God himself.

[8 : 46] His glory is communicated in their actions. He is the most supreme, the most glorious one, the glory of all other glories, in whose presence no one is able to stand or look.

Notice next, they are singing. Verse 3, holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. Now, notice what's going on here.

Three times is like a highlighter pen in Hebrew. You know, if you want to really emphasize something, you say it three times. If you want to make sure that it's been heard, you need to say it more than once, you need to say it more than twice, you need to say it three times.

And God notices holy, holy, holy. Someone else pointed out to me this week as I was listening to what they were saying on it. They said this doesn't just mean morally perfect, right?

The angels are not crying out, you know, moral, moral, moral. Nor are they saying just that God is like separate or different. This is not different, different, different.

[9:49] Now, this is a word that they're using to sort of try and capture the godness of God, the glory and majesty and brilliance of this one who alone is God.

He really is the kind of fulfillment of, not the fulfillment of, the greater than all the fake shadows of all the idols. This is holy God, holy God, holy God, blazingly brilliant, unapproachably perfect, majestically powerful.

He is without rival and his glory doesn't just fill the temple as Isaiah sees it, but it fills what? The whole earth is full of his glory, inescapable godness of God.

Now, the seriousness of all this is underlined by the shaking. So notice verse four, at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the threshold shook and the temple was filled with smoke. Again, this is Jerusalem's most solid building.

And yet, simply just at the description of God's otherness and greatness and majesty called out by the seraphim, this most solid of buildings shakes. And it shakes at the doorpost, which seems to be, I think, a kind of no entry sign.

[11:04] Don't come in here. Do not approach this God. He is unapproachably brilliant and holy. You will not pass. And then comes the smoke.

The temple fills with smoke to make the unapproachable God invisible again as he is clouded with the smoke that fills the temple. It is hard to do justice to Isaiah's words.

You kind of ruin them by explaining them. You almost should just sit down and read them over and over. But just notice how the passage works. That while we're told Isaiah sees the Lord, he sees the Lord, but then what gets emphasized in the passage is his distance from the Lord.

It's almost as if I see the Lord, but I just can't get near to him. I can't even begin to grasp the edges of the boundaries of his greatness. Isaiah sees, but he can't get near.

He understands, but he can't comprehend. Isaiah lies cold in his tomb, but the glorious God is still on the throne ruling in unapproachable brilliance. Psalm 99 puts it like this.

[12:16] The Lord reigns. Let the nations tremble. He sits enthroned between the cherubim. Let the earth shake. Great is the Lord in Zion. He is exalted over all the nations.

Let them praise your great and awesome name. He is holy. I just want to ask you this morning, because I think this is just the question that we're supposed to ask at this point in Isaiah's vision, is do you know this about God?

Have you seen this about God? Do you remember this about God? This world is owned and ruled not by Uzziah, not by all of the other things that we think and imagine might be glorious, but by a God who dwells in unapproachable brilliance.

And in the face of his holy glory, everything else shakes. I don't know about you, but sometimes when I read passages like this in the Old Testament, I think, oh, that's just, it's so intimidating.

It's kind of scary, isn't it? I don't really like to think of God like this, you might be thinking. I'd rather think of Jesus than think of God like this. But let me say to you, if you or I use Jesus like that to try and tame God, then we have misused the person of Jesus.

[13:35] In Isaiah 6, the triune God of glory, Father, Son, and Spirit is accommodating himself to a vision that Isaiah can just grasp the edges of. It's a brilliant condescension of God to accommodate himself so that Isaiah can sort of touch the edges of who he is.

And in the incarnation, God the Son, yeah, part of the triune God, co-equal with the Father and the Spirit, one God, God the Son, unites to himself human flesh, accommodating himself so that we too might be able to see what God is like in human flesh.

And even still, in that accommodation, we must not forget that Christ in his humanity is still one person with the eternal Son, one with the Father and the Spirit.

Now, you are told that in the New Testament. You know, on the Mount of Transfiguration, it's as if the sort of the curtain of the veil of the glory of Jesus is just chinked open a little bit.

And the apostles, they see it, don't they? And they don't know what to do. They're terrified. In Revelation 1, when John sees, he sees the veil opened even further.

[14:54] This is what John says in his vision in Revelation 1. I saw someone like the Son of Man, dressed in a robe, reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze, glowing in a furnace. His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand, he held seven stars and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Brothers and sisters, we must not lose sight of the glorious brilliance of our God. Veiled in the humanity of Jesus is the person of the Son, who is one with the Father and the Spirit, glorious in power and majesty, the same God of Isaiah's vision.

And one day, every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that he is Lord, who even with the slightest glimpse of his divine glory is beyond our comprehension.

[16:02] And if we were to see even just what it is like in John's vision, we would fall down as though dead. God is very glorious. Secondly, notice sinful servant in verses 5 to 7.

Look down at verse 5. Isaiah says, No sooner has Isaiah glimpsed the greatness and goodness of God in his vision than he becomes acutely aware of his own unworthiness.

Woe is me, he says. Now, if you were with us last week, you'll have seen Isaiah pronouncing woes on others. So in chapter 5, Isaiah said, Woe to the hero at drinking wine.

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes. Woe to those who call good evil and evil good. But now, confronted with this vision of the godness of God, he says, Woe is me.

Woe is me. I am lost, says the prophet. I'm a man of unclean lips. I wonder whether for you, when you read it, I mean, it felt like this for me.

[17:11] You read it and you think, wow, it's a little strange that Isaiah thinks first about his lips. What is it about his lips? What about his actions or his thoughts? Well, it seems to be, doesn't it, that the point is that Isaiah knows that at this moment his mouth would betray him.

His lips lay bare his heart. What comes out of his mouth is what's in his heart. And Isaiah is suddenly aware in the presence of this great God, I mustn't, I cannot speak.

Anything I say now will condemn me. It's not hard, is it, to imagine what that is like. Maybe you, like me, lie awake at night thinking about what you said. Why did I say that?

Why did you say that? Worried that you might have shown the fool that you really are. Exposed what was really going on inside your heart.

And that's what's here at a much bigger level, isn't it? Isaiah has seen the glory of the King, the Lord of hosts, and he's realizing, oh my goodness. The words that I used, my angry outburst, the unkindness, the slander, the filthy language, the innuendo, the hurt, the spiteful words said on my own in my room, the muttering under my breath.

[18:19] God knows it all. He fills the earth. His glory is everywhere. I cannot escape him. He's been listening all along. Woe is me, he says.

Woe is me. Of course, this is true for you and I as well, isn't it, this morning. We might be very aware of the sins of others. But confronted with the glory of God, all of a sudden, you know now if you grasp verses 1 to 4 of chapter 6, because right now in this moment, you're not mostly worried about the sins of other people, but the sins of your own.

God hears. He knows. He knows what we've said in our rooms on our own. He knows what we've typed into our phones. He knows that there's not a place that we've been that's able to hide from him.

There's not a motive that God has not seen. There's not an action that he's not noticed. And not because he's looking to trip us up. It's not like God runs some kind of divine CCTV system which pings every time someone goes wrong.

No, it's because his glory fills the earth. He is absolutely inescapable by nature. Which means that every moment of every day, in every place and every person, we live in his inescapable presence.

[19:29] His godness fills the earth. He is everywhere. Woe is me. Forget anybody else. Woe is me. In verse 6, all is not lost for Isaiah.

The seraphim picks up a coal from the altar. It's a live coal. Notice it's still burning. It's come from the altar of sacrifice at the front of the temple where the sacrifices of atonement are made.

And the coal from the altar is brought up with tongues and it touches the lips of Isaiah, at which the seraphim says in verse 7, See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.

This is an amazing moment in the book of Isaiah, right? His uncleanness is dealt with by God. The heart from which his mouth speaks is cleansed in a personal encounter with the sacrifice of atonement on the altar.

Now, if you're really thinking, which you might be, right? And you were here a few weeks ago. You might be thinking, goodness, hasn't Isaiah already told us in his book that God wishes they were bringing no more sacrifices?

[20 : 32] Hasn't Isaiah already told us that the sacrifices of the temple were ineffective in chapter 1? You know, God tells the people in chapter 1, Listen, I am not impressed.

I would rather you didn't even turn up. I hate your sacrifices. And that makes this surprising. But as we read on in Isaiah's book, we realize that the power of the coal from the altar comes not because they're looking back at sacrifices that were made, but because it is looking forward to a sacrifice that will be made.

Isaiah's personal encounter with the coal in Isaiah 6 is a pointer to our need for a personal encounter with the cross of Jesus Christ, where God the Son in human flesh sacrificed his body on the cross to atone for our sin so that his blood could wash us morally clean.

Jesus' cross does the double thing that the seraphim talk about in verse 7. Notice they talk about the taking away of guilt, the dealing with the shame, the moral consequences of unclean words and sin.

And they make atonement. They bring us back, make us at one with God, drawing us near. And the cross does that. And that leaves us, doesn't it, with a question this morning, whether you and I have experienced that personally.

[21 : 55] Do you know that your sins have been dealt with? Have you experienced what it is for God not to take a coal from the altar at the front of the temple, but for God to take the sacrifice of his own son and cleanse you of your sin?

For you to hear from the Lord those words, your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for. Of course, there can be nothing more important, can there? If you've been tracking what we've been saying so far, if you've understood this vision of the greatness and the holiness of God, that we live in his awesome majesty, and you've seen your weakness and your unworthiness and the depth of your sin, if you know that Uzziah is dead, your sin and your weakness is exposed, you will know that your need above all other needs is that this God would deal with your sin.

And that's what he does in the person of Jesus Christ. So forget the distractions, the gimmicks, the toys. This is what you need.

The great news of the gospel is that the forgiveness that Isaiah witnessed and experienced here is available to all who would come and trust in Christ. So if you've never done that, do that now.

Now, just quietly in your own heart, Lord, take the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus and make it mine. Bring him to me that I might be forgiven.

[23 : 29] And you will hear those words, your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for. Finally then, there's a difficult job in verses 8 to 13.

We've covered lots of ground already, but we must finish with these because verse 8 to the end really are setting up the rest of Isaiah's book. In verse 8, you hear God speaking.

It's his first recorded words in the chapter, and he's asking for someone to send with a message. Who will go for us, he asks in verse 8. Isaiah is emboldened by his forgiveness.

He offers himself in God's service. He says, I am willing. Send me, he says. Humbly offering himself in response to the forgiveness he's experienced. But the task, as it turns out, is not an easy one. Look down at verse 9. He says, go and tell this people, be ever hearing, but never understanding. Be ever seeing, but never perceiving.

[24 : 29] Make the hearts of this people calloused. Make their ears dull and close their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears. Understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.

Now, Isaiah's given this job, isn't he, to preach, to carry the message. But the message is one that brings judgment. A message that will be heard, but not understood.

Not perceived. And as you read Isaiah's book, it's not because Isaiah is being obscure in his preaching. It's not like he's using language, which is difficult to understand. He's not vague about God's judgment and the need for repentance.

No, the problem is not with the message, it's with the hearers. There is something in the hearts of the people, which means that they're not interested in the truth of Isaiah's message. They're not concerned with the things of God. So the more he speaks, the more they don't listen. It's hard to imagine, is it a job more challenging?

[25 : 25] It's like kind of just running at a brick wall over and over and over again. And the more he runs at it, the firmer the wall gets. It's interesting, these words belong to Isaiah here or to Isaiah's book, but they're taken up in the New Testament by Jesus and the Apostle Paul to describe their ministry as well.

As the gospel of the Lord Jesus is made plain, even in the speaking of the parables of Jesus, people block their ears, they don't want to hear, and the more they hear, the harder their hearts become.

The example in the verses is the hard skin on your feet, isn't it? The more your shoes rub, the harder the skin becomes. And so with our hearts, with the hearts of the people of Jerusalem, the more they hear Isaiah's message, the harder and more callous they become until they cannot hear and judgment comes.

You know, they're like drowning men swimming away from a lifeboat that's sent to save them, or an injured person running from the hospital. The more the doctor calls, the faster they run. But God is not surprised by this reaction, is he?

In fact, it's as if he knows that's what their response to be. It's the intention of God sending Isaiah. Isaiah is sent to expose the hardness, to confirm people in it, even as he brings justice.

[26 : 48] And he's to do it right until the destruction of the land. I think that perhaps the most surprising thing about all of this, in Isaiah's passage, and when Jesus uses this verse, and when Paul uses this verse, is that the people who are like this are religious people.

You know, the people that Isaiah is talking about, that Jesus is talking about, that Paul is talking about, they're not in Westfields this morning. They're in church buildings. They listen every week. But as soon as, you know, the conviction comes, as soon as that awareness of woe is, I mean, the internal lawyer wakes up. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. That's not you.

You don't need to listen to that. It's woe to all of them, not to you. Those unclean lips, that's probably the pastor's problem. It's not yours. And so week on week, they hear, they hear, they hear, but the harder they become, maybe that's you this morning, you've heard the gospel so much, you're zoned out, even now as I speak.

Perhaps you're raised in a Christian home, but there's no tenderness to the Lord Jesus, with whom you're so familiar. And the more you hear about him, the less you're interested. All this talk of sin and sacrifice, I don't really bother it.

[28 : 03] And so the only message which can save you rubs your heart and makes it harder and harder, it is a terrible position to be in. In a way, it's a taste of hell itself, a perpetual rejection of the God who rules and reigns, over and over and over again.

If that's you this morning, please wake up and hear God's message. Back in chapter six, it's no surprise, is it, that Isaiah's next question is, how long have I got to do this job for?

If you're given a particularly difficult job, good question. How long? How long for? And the answer is not what he wanted, until the cities lie ruined, verse 11, and without inhabitants, until the horses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged.

Verse 12, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken, and though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. There's no happy ending for Isaiah.

Rather the opposite. Keep preaching Isaiah until these people are carted off into exile in Babylon, and a little bit is left, but even that little bit will be laid waste again.

[29 : 10] In a way, there's an echo, isn't there, to us in the instructions here, that we are to preach the gospel and to share it with our friends, our family, our schools, our workplaces, not just while it's easy or until we succeed, but rather until the end.

You and I are to keep going because faithfulness to the Lord's calling matters more to us than success. Success. Success is faithfulness to the Lord's calling.

If you look down there, at the end of verse 13, there is a chink of light because from the stump of the cut down tree, the felled Judah, something will grow. Notice what he says, but as the terebinth and the oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.

Of course, this is Jesus. Isn't it? Jesus is the holy seed that comes from the stump of God's defeated people. This is the new covenant in the Lord Jesus rising out of the old covenant, the promise fulfilled.

Now I know, right, that my time is pretty much gone. I know I'm on the bare threads of your attention, but if I can land this, this is brilliant, right? This is so helpful to us this morning if we will see this ending.

[30:33] You see, in a way, which I don't think Isaiah is fully realizing, because he doesn't get to see it all, there is a future for God's people.

And this future for God's people will be kind of like Jerusalem. Yeah? So it comes from that. But it will not be quite the same.

And so reading this as a New Testament Christian, what we see is that this throne of God in verse one, this glorious throne, is the throne of Jesus Christ, who is now the king of God's people.

We see that actually all these different elements of Isaiah's vision all blend into one. So actually, Jesus is the unapproachable God who now rules over us and leads us home.

He also is the sacrifice for our sin and the replacement for Isaiah. So that for you and I this morning, we don't gather to a nation under a human king.

[31:37] We come to a kingdom, a heavenly kingdom, whose king is Jesus, who is the glorious one of the throne of Isaiah's vision and the fulfillment of Isaiah's throne as well.

And so the glorious power of God forgives my sin and rules my every moment as King Jesus is with me and for me. Isaiah 6 verse one, it starts, doesn't it?

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the temple. You and I, we can say something like this, right? In the year I lost my job, in the year my health failed, in the year my wife died, in the year my money ran out, I saw Jesus high and exalted on the throne of a cross and the glory of his robe clothed me in righteousness that I might belong to him.

Isn't that wonderful? He is my glorious king and I am his child. This great God who fills everything in every way, whose glory is absolutely unapproachable, that God is my king.

I wear his robe and I'm called by his name. How brilliant is that? Let me pray. Let's replace. Perhaps let's just take a moment of quiet as we ponder in our own hearts.

[33:15] Let's. Let's. Holy, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty.

The whole earth is full of his glory. Heavenly Father, we thank you that this is true of you, Father, Son and Spirit.

And thank you that in the person of the Lord Jesus, you have atoned for our sin, that we might be sent with your message to a lost and broken world and that we might be united to your kingdom in him, that we do not need to be terrified of your glory, but are saved even by it.

And so, Lord, we pray, please, would you help us to be like Isaiah, to keep speaking, regardless of the consequences, that others might come to hear and know of your brilliant glory and of the wonderful sacrifice of Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.