

The Burning Vision of Isaiah - *Isaiah 6*

Introduction – The vision Isaiah records here inaugurates him into his ministry and so, chronologically, it should be at the beginning of the book. In the center of the first section (chs 1-12), Isaiah sets it chiastically in the prominent place. Glory/terror, woe, and salvation: this parallels the center of the book and the attack from and deliverance from Assyria (chs 36-37). Uzziah, the leper-king, who rebelliously burned incense in the temple, is about to die. Holiness on fire is everywhere in this vision-message. And fire is both a sign of destruction as well as refinement.

Burning Glory and Holiness on Fire (vv1-4) – Uzziah had been a successful king (2 Chron 26:1-15) but ended his reign in humiliation (2 Chron 26:16-23). As death closed in upon him, unclean and hopeless, he was a symbol of the nation's plight. In that year, Isaiah had a vision, seeing the true King, high and lifted up, above all of Judah, above all of their idols, above all of the earth. His train filled the temple (v1), the whole earth was full of His glory (v3), and smoke filled the house of God (v4). Seraphim (literally, “burning ones”), and possibly millions of them (Rev 5:11), stood above the throne, crying out to one another the trifold “holy.” The sound of the worship shook the house to its foundations (and still does – Heb 12:26-28) and the “voice” of the “burning ones” filled the house with smoke, the manifest glory of God.

Glory-Robe – There is no room for any other glory, for the hem of His robe alone fills the temple and the earth is full of His glory. And just as a wife is the glory of her husband (1 Cor 11:7b), so God's creation is His glory and all of the earth will come to this glory, be this glory, manifest this glory. God clothed His Son in this glory and He became a man, for man is the image and glory of God (1 Cor 11:7a).

The Trinity – Many believe the “holy, holy, holy” reveals what the seraphim already knew; they were worshipping the three Persons of the Godhead. Some think this is stretching the text. However, John relates this passage to the Lord Jesus (John 12:41), and Luke relates this passage to the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25). Let the New Testament be our divine commentary.

Confession: Lips on Fire (vv5-7) – Isaiah, representing Judah, is below, and the Lord is high and lifted up. Judah/Uzziah is not on the throne and the Lord is. Judah/mankind is in no place to manipulate God. Notice, Isaiah is not breaking out into deep fits of succulent worship feelings (“this is so incredible to be here”). Rather, Isaiah's response is immediately, “Oh no.” The time of reckoning had come (v5).

“Woe is me!” – Isaiah immediately notices his own sin first and identifies himself with the very ones he has been denouncing in his own sermons. There is not a hint of comparison in his words. When we are before the Lord, it is irrelevant to compare for the holiness of God reveals the stark separation between all of us and His holy requirements (i.e. James 1:10). Isaiah is also acting representatively for the nations (in a priest-like fashion) and so he finds himself doubly condemned.

Unclean Lips – This is not merely a ritual uncleanness, for the uncleanness of the lips is an expression of our lives and that which comes from our heart (Mark 7:20-23, Matt 12:36-37, James 3:6). This also reminds us of Uzziah who, in his leprosy, would have had to cover his mouth and cry out “unclean” whenever anyone approached.

Burning Coal Atonement – One of the “burning ones” takes a live coal and touches the unclean lips of Isaiah. The altar from which the coal is taken represents the atoning sacrifice and so Isaiah's sin is “atoned.” God's wrath had therefore been propitiated and satisfied, providing forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation needed for the sinner. God was being both just and the One Who justifies through this atonement from heaven (Rom 3:26).

Commission: Lips on Fire (vv8-13) – Isaiah hears and responds to the Triune voice calling for the message to go forth to Israel (v8). And then the projections of the commission are given. Vv9-10 describe the ministry's spiritual projections, and they seem surprising. The historical and political expectations are given in vv11-13a, and finally the Messianic expectations of hope and grace are given in v13b.

Smoldering, Dull People – Jesus makes clear, quoting vv9-10, that his sermons will only make many people more hardened in His day (Matt 13:14-15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10). That is what God intended and that is ultimately what those people wanted. They are quoted in John 12:39ff and Acts 28:26-27 to describe why the people fail to accept the message. And so we see how long this curse would go on: from Isaiah's day up until the time of Jesus and His apostles and the fiery destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, the end of the Old Order.

Heaven's Gospel Initiative – But Jesus also comes and changes everything; He is the Seed from the stump (6:13b). The glory of God has come upon the earth and taken on flesh. A New Order, a New Temple, fiery tongues to the nations go forth. John the Baptist asks if Jesus is the Christ and He responds saying, “The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me” (Matt 11:5-6). In other words, while we live in a world where there are many whose hearts are still hardened, overall, the world is a white harvest ready to be picked (John 4:35).