

Explore the Bible: God Sends

August 24, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for Sept. 13 focuses on Isaiah 6:1-13.*

“Here am I. Send me!” How many times have these words been spoken by young and enthusiastic candidates for ministry work? How many Christians have heard sermons on these words that urge going overseas to share the gospel with non-Christians or becoming a pastor? More than can be counted, I am sure.

Christians’ passion to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others is right and admirable. But the words quoted above, taken from Isaiah’s commission in chapter 6 of the book that bears his name, become much heavier and even terrifying when read in context.

Isaiah’s meeting with the living God is one of Scripture’s most evocative and intense descriptions of a divine-human encounter, and Isaiah’s consequent calling as a prophet sets the stage for the rest of the book. But while many Christians see Isaiah’s commissioning as paradigmatic for ministry work, a close reading of the text might make one wonder how many Christians would enthusiastically embrace the kind of ministry to which God calls Isaiah.

The glory of God

Isaiah begins by noting that his encounter with the Lord took place “in the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1), indicating a time of political upheaval and fear over Judah’s security in the face of the advancing Assyrian Empire.

The Lord is seated in the Jerusalem temple, with the mere hem of his robe being more than large enough to fill the entire building—a massive

structure (6:1). The Lord is surrounded by flying seraphim, flaming angels with six wings (6:2). They cry out to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (6:3).

Biblical Hebrew lacks terms equivalent to “more” and “most.” So, it frequently uses repetition to communicate the same idea. For example, “gold gold” would be purer and higher quality than regular gold. But the Seraphim’s description of the Lord’s holiness is the only example of *triple* repetition in the Old Testament, indicating that the Lord’s holiness is above and beyond any comparison.

As if the visage of a gigantic man seated on a throne surrounded by flaming angels was not enough, the temple itself and its doors shake violently as the angels sing, all while the room fills with smoke (6:4).

The sinfulness of humanity

Considering the description he offers in 6:1-4, Isaiah’s response to suddenly finding himself in the presence of the Lord is quite understandable: “I am going to die!” The prophet is filled with absolute terror at the sight of the Lord, because he knows what it means for a sinful mortal like him to be in the unmitigated presence of the holy God—destruction (6:5).

Isaiah’s experience finds an interesting echo in the New Testament. In Luke 5:8, after Peter witnesses Jesus performing a miracle, Peter falls on his knees and cries out, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” This subtle allusion back to Isaiah 6 indicates Peter recognizes Jesus is no mere human.

Isaiah is completely correct: he is as good as dead. But something unexpected happens. One of the seraphim grabs a live coal from the altar of sacrifice and flies up to Isaiah, pressing the coal to his lips. “See, this has

touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (6:7). And as simple as that, Isaiah is suddenly safe to stand in the presence of God.

This kind of unilateral, transforming grace is not unique to Isaiah’s experience. God stands ready and willing to purify all who come before him in humility and repentance. The person of Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s presence on earth, drives out sin and impurity with a mere touch (Luke 8:43-48).

The call to prophesy

It is not a coincidence that Isaiah’s purification and forgiveness centers upon his lips; his mouth has been purified to speak the word of God to the people of God. The Lord asks, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” Isaiah’s response provides the famous words, “Here am I. Send me!” (6:8)

But Isaiah has little grasp of that for which he’s volunteering. God calls Isaiah to, “Make the heart of this people calloused; 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” (6:10). Isaiah’s ministry is not one of bringing repentance, but of hardening already sinful hearts.

When Isaiah asks how long he must do this, the Lord responds by telling him to preach until Judah is thoroughly conquered and laid waste (6:11-12). But there is a single note of hope at the very end: God will leave a “holy seed,” a remnant, to “be the stump in the land” (6:13).

Most, perhaps all, Christians who answer a call to proclaim the gospel do so with the expectation that their ministry will lead to repentance, transformation and growth. How many Christians would answer a call to preach if God told them their preaching would only harden sinners’ hearts

and lead to judgment? How many Christians would take a pastorate knowing that their preaching will kill the church instead of bringing revival?

Isaiah's call and commission stand in stark contrast to much of contemporary Western Christianity's expectations for ministry. Before you call out, "Here am I. Send me!" ask yourself if you really are prepared for what's next.

Joshua Sharp is a writer and Bible teacher living in Waco. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Truett Theological Seminary.