

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for March 8: Honor the Lord

February 23, 2009

The placement of Isaiah's call in the sixth chapter rather than the first chapter is a curiosity and generates some interpretive debate. The placement is a bit unusual (see Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 1, Jonah 1). Without engaging the debate, the placement may well have come in the right order assuming his call also was motivated by his observation of the current sinful conditions of his known world (chapters 1-5).

When the prophet put pen to paper, he wrote as one looking back upon his vision and included his prophetic interpretation of what he had observed and his vision for restoration. Isaiah, with his autobiographical testimony, shows Judah the necessary step in restoration and his personal experience of how faith can change the entire nation.

Many individuals called to ministry respond to a pressing need. God works from the external situation to prompt the heart. For this to be an appropriate way to adapt to the placement in chapter 6, one can see Isaiah going to the temple to worship. Broken over the rebelliousness of Judah and Jerusalem, he hears God call him to be a prophet.

I grew up in the oil field in central Mississippi. My father was a production superintendent of an independent oil company but also operated a contracting business to perform work for most of the oil companies in the field. He hired many men, and they were mostly rough men, cursed like sailors, mistreated their families and had no place for God in their lives. I looked from the church windows out into a harsh and hurting world and

from that perspective was called to preach and make a difference through Christ.

Every Christian must be reminded that there is not only a call to prophecy, preaching or other vocational ministry functions but also a call to discipleship. The first followers, disciples, of Christ were called to be fishers of men.

In church life today, worship is more asking God to grant our wishes than to hear the call to service. God's people prefer blessings of forgiveness, watch care, help to succeed, protection from harm, healing the sick and assurance of prosperity.

God's Word, however, stresses that Christ came to minister and not to be ministered to, to serve with humility and sacrifice, to show compassion upon others. Isaiah's experience teaches us how to honor God in worship that includes service. What does God expect of me when I worship?

Recognition (Isaiah 6:1)

Isaiah begins with, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord"

One of my favorite stories is about the little boy who came home from church with his family. When lunch was ready, Mom said, "Go wash your hands." The boy responded, "Germs and God, germs and God. That all I hear, and I ain't never seen either one of them."

Isaiah did not literally see God and makes no effort to describe him (Exodus 33:20-23). He saw evidence or a glimpse of his presence, e.g. the throne, the train, the seraphs, the shaking doorposts and thresholds, and he heard the voices of the seraphs calling one to the other. "Seraph" means "burning one" referring to an unearthly being with some human features (hands, faces, voices). Isaiah may have seen these strange creatures to mean that God was Lord of all beings for they obviously served and worshiped God.

In this mystical experience, Isaiah “saw” the Lord in all of his glory and holiness. The suggested symbolism is that of standing and looking beyond the altar of incense into the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle or temple where God dwelt. The shaking of the door post and thresholds reveals the dynamic power of God.

You must come to worship, recognizing the Lord’s presence. Worship should be God-centered and not man-centered. Pastors and musicians are not performers or entertainers. Worship can deteriorate into show business with worship leaders as performers to entertain. If the worshipper is not careful, he may be easily fooled into thinking he has worshiped when he has only been manipulated.

Often rather than praising our God, the purpose of worship is to support a pastor, enjoy the music, hear a sermon and go home happy. Worship is helping every person to recognize and sense the profound presence of God. Worshippers often come to worship to make their weekly stand against God by denying his lordship, by apathetic neglect, by willful disobedience, and glib, ritualistic participation.

Reverence (vv. 1-4)

Worship is a contraction of the Anglo-Saxon noun “worthship,” signifying recognition of the worth of the object adored. John, the apostle, in a similar vision of the throne of God in heaven has the 24 elders proclaim, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (Revelation 4:11).

Isaiah points out the foremost characteristic of God that engages his worship experience: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” “Glory” is the manifestation of God in our earthly world. God is holy, almighty and his glory is throughout the entire earth.

“Holiness” is the absolute essence of his divinity and his “glory” heralds his holiness. Worshippers should seek a similar kind of experience of bowing before the sovereign glory of the holy God of both heaven and earth and all creatures therein.

Repentance (v. 5)

Genuine reverence for God leads to confession and repentance. People come to understand how depraved they are when they look at the perfect holiness of God. Seeing “the King, the Lord Almighty,”

Isaiah’s conscience focused on his own guilt, depravity, sinfulness and ruin. Isaiah saw nothing but uncleanness and depravity in himself or his nation. Having a vision, an experience that was private and personal to him, he cried: “Woe am I. I am ruined.” His lips and those of his people were not fit to join the song of praise. Recognizing that sin had ruined his life, he looked for repentance and resolution.

True worship will not allow people to ignore their sinfulness. The ugliness of our lives cannot be ignored any longer. We no longer can accept our unholy thoughts, attitudes and behavior in the presence of God’s purity. Repentance is to seek the cleansing of our hearts and lives through forgiveness.

Reconciliation (vv. 6-7)

The seraph, symbolically, was present to serve God and to be an instrument to help in the removal of sin from Isaiah and to deliver the revelation of God. The seraph, burning like fire, flew to Isaiah with the coal from the altar in his hand and touched his lips, saying “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Instantaneously, the moment of reconciliation of the unholy with the holy

took place. This was atonement in the sense of restoring Isaiah's standing before God, of removing the sin that separated the two and making the relationship whole and healthy. Since Isaiah focused on his "unclean lips," it was the lips that were purged but represents the purging of all sin. This was not something Isaiah could do for himself but a gift of God's grace through faith and repentance.

Worship should bring man and God together. That reconciliation is only possible through an honest look at sin and a willingness to be purged by the forgiving and redemptive work of our Lord.

Response (vv.8-13)

The prelude to a resolute response is a clean heart. Genuine worship requires a response—one of heart, soul and mind but also of body. The best message for cleansing comes from one who has been cleansed. Isaiah is ready to become the man of his calling, a prophet, indeed.

The dialogue is rather straight forward. God offers the invitation: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah's answer was without objection, quibbling, resistance, or argument: "Here am I! Send me." The answer is not unlike Mary, astonished at her favor and task of bearing a son though a virgin, responded: "I am your servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38).

Worship is more than pew-sitting, bench-warming, class study, committee meetings and running the institutional church. There is a certain amount of "going" that God requires.

To Isaiah, God gave this imperative: "Go and tell this people...." Isaiah now asks the question, "How long, O Lord?" (v. 11). God responded with "Until ..." (Matthew 28:19-20).