

Isaiah 6 – The True King is Holy (notes)

The questions at the start are intended as a way to start to focus people on the topic. In the second question – character traits – people will end up discussing holiness – essentially living in obedience to God, which is worked out in how we treat and relate to others.

In 1-5 Isaiah sketches the situation into which he was called. The disobedience and sin of the people which must be judged (1.24-5, 2.10-11, 3.11, 5.30) is contrasted with the future blessedness and holiness the nation will enjoy (2.1-5, 4.2-6). The situation is bleak despite the glimmers of hope for the people, and in chapter 6 the contrast between the people and their God becomes startlingly clear. In Isaiah's experience however we see that if there is hope of cleansing for Isaiah, maybe there is hope too for the people. Isaiah's vision and call lends authority to his message and shows he is driven by an experience and conviction of God's holiness and majesty. It is for these reasons that his call occurs here instead of the beginning of the book.

Uzziah. The mention of Uzziah's death is significant not just in the fact that this heralded the end of a period of stability. The king is often taken as a picture of the people as a whole and, in 2 Chronicles 26.16-21 we read of Uzziah's downfall, his mocking of God's holiness in the temple. In this context, the fall from grace of Israel's greatest king since Solomon, we are faced with Isaiah's vision of the one true King – the Holy One of Israel, high and lifted up, the King who will never fail and who reigns forever.

God's holiness and transcendence is reinforced by the words and imagery used.

Throne signifying king and judge.

Train (=hem) of his robe – mark of identity in ancient near east for kings so signifies power and majesty – filled – His glory fills the space – there is no room for anyone to stand.

Seraphs – literally burning ones – flaming creatures signifying holiness, covering face and feet suggests humility and reverence as they serve.

Holy holy holy. The repetition is for emphasis – only place in scripture Hebrew word repeated 3 times therefore shows God's infinite holiness. This refers to his separation, his 'distinctness'. In His majesty and supreme power He is exalted and different from all He has made, yet He calls Isaiah into His presence.

The mere declaration of God's holiness is enough to shake the foundations; smoke obscures His holiness from sight. Isaiah realises he is excluded by his lack of holiness and realises the consequences – he cannot continue to exist. There are two reasons; Isaiah recognises the seraph's praise with pure lips, something he cannot do – how can his lips used for self-glory be used in holy service? His lips are also evidence of what is in his heart (James 3.9-12, Matt 15.18). To make matters worse he realises he is also part of a contaminated people. The second is that He has seen the true King in all His majesty, glory and purity. "Woe to me" – he simply cannot continue to exist, realising his sinfulness and God's holiness. Holiness and sinfulness cannot coexist. It's significant that a plea for mercy does not even cross Isaiah's mind – in the presence of God's burning holiness that is not even an option.

How can Isaiah and his people be related to the Holy One, and demonstrate His character? God provides the answer – His grace is as much part of His character as holiness, and can only be fully appreciated in the light of that burning holiness. God cleanses that which was unclean – Isaiah's 'lips' and the tool which he is to use in God's service, and it is God who takes the initiative.

Isaiah 6 – The True King is Holy (notes)

In the OT fire was a symbol of God's burning holiness, wrath and judgement, but this coal was from the altar where holiness was satisfied by the death of a substitutionary sacrifice and therefore speaks of cleansing, atonement (process of bringing sinners into right relation with God – covering the debt), forgiveness, reconciliation and fitting for service.

Instead of being excluded Isaiah is now 'joined with God' in his purposes. He has been brought in and now hears the voice of God.

You may want to stop and spend some time in worship, or allow time for repentance at this point in the bible study. If time for repentance is appropriate you could allow people to write out a prayer of confession or write down sin, and symbolically burn it or place it at the foot of a cross.

Isaiah is given a choice. God commissions different people in different ways, but wants willing volunteers, not reluctant conscripts. Isaiah's response to experiencing God's holiness and cleansing is one of humility, service and obedience to Him. The reason why he had to experience God's incredible power, majesty and holiness becomes apparent with the magnitude and difficulty of his task. One to which he would see little fruit, so needs to be reminded of God's awesomeness.

Verses 9-13 now give the reason why Isaiah has been brought into God's service

These verses are used throughout the NT (Matt 13.14-5), Mark 4.12, John 12.39-41, and Acts 28.26-7). It seems odd to tell people not to understand. Yet Isaiah understood this to mean he had to communicate God's truth simply (Isaiah 28.9) – being accused of treating people like children. However those who resist the truth can only be changed by hearing the truth, which does mean the risk of people rejecting the truth again and becoming more hardened. It would have been easy for Isaiah to tell people things were ok, God was nice and cuddly, he would forgive them eventually, sin didn't really matter, but the reality is that sin does matter, God cannot stand it and people often do not want to hear they are messed up and living in a way that is morally wrong. The opportunity of hearing Isaiah present the truth of the hope of salvation clearly ultimately meant judgement for those who continue to resist and pass the point of no return.

This is hard to take so Isaiah asks for how long? The land was theirs to enjoy as they lived in obedience to God, but their disobedience would result in them being devastated and vomited out of the land (Leviticus 18.25-28).

Isaiah is called to a lifetime's service that leaves success to God. But there is hope in the last verse of the 'holy seed/offspring' (referring back to Genesis 3.15 – offspring/seed of woman crushing the serpent, and forward to Isaiah 53.2?) refers to a people who will finally enjoy the promises of God, belong to him and be dedicated to doing His will. We are the fulfilment of that through Jesus the ultimate 'holy seed'!!

The process of becoming a servant of God: recognition of the hopelessness of our situation, recognising the character and nature of God, recognising the gulf between us and God, the possibility to receive grace and forgiveness, glimpse of the heart of God which leads us to offer ourselves in service, and the giving of the task of taking the name of Jesus to the nations.

It's important to take time at the end to summarise and allow people to process what they have learnt and how that applies. Don't see the questions as prescriptive but a guide through the passage and be sensitive to stopping and allowing time for reflection/prayer/worship. For next time read Isaiah 40.