

THE MINISTRY OF ISAIAH

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 6:1–13; 7:1–7; 20:1–6; 38:1–22

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa. 6:8)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Sept. 1	Mark 1:1–8	God Sends a Messenger
T	Sept. 2	Isa. 7:1–7	God Defends the Chosen People
W	Sept. 3	Isa. 20:1–6	God Warns of Coming Disaster
Th	Sept. 4	Matt. 11:1–6	God Fulfills God’s Promises
F	Sept. 5	Matt. 11:7–15	God Works through Unexpected Vessels
Sa	Sept. 6	Ps. 145:1–12	God Is Gracious and Merciful

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

This quarter of Bible lessons invites us to discover and appreciate how God, through prophets and other leaders, gave help and guidance to the people of Judah in order that we may come to see the hand of God in our own lives and in all human affairs. The four lessons of unit 1 focus on the prophet Isaiah and key events that happened during his ministry. Appropriately, we begin with his call to prophesy on God’s behalf.

The sixth chapter of Isaiah is one of the most familiar texts in the Hebrew Scripture. Because it is among the very rare glimpses given in the Bible of the glory of God in heaven, it holds a particular fascination for many believers. It is also a favorite passage of those who feel that they, like Isaiah, have been singled out for a special ministry and for those looking for inspiration themselves. You may recognize the setting in the wonderful hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” by Reginald Heber and Isaiah’s response in the popular “Here I Am, Lord” by Dan Schutte.

This text has been used as the basis for oratorios and countless anthems and worship songs; however, the message given to Isaiah in the context of this vision was not all good news.

The prophet would tell his people the word of God, but they would not understand its meaning; they would be presented with the truth but fail to comprehend its importance. This was not what God wanted, but it is what God foretold. How terrible this must have been for Isaiah—yet he still said yes to God’s call.

Holy and gracious God, be with us this day. Help us, like Isaiah, to hear your call to serve you and to say yes to it. Help us to trust in your wisdom and guidance so that we may become vessels to bring your light to the world. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 6:1–8; 38:4–5

6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

38:4 Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵“Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.”

AN INCREDIBLE EXPERIENCE

Isaiah 6:1 provides two important details for us. First, Isaiah’s call came “in the year that King Uzziah died.” In other words,

this was a time of unease and change, made worse by multiple external threats to the tiny country of Judah. Second, the call came while Isaiah was in the temple—in other words, at worship!

We can imagine the young Isaiah standing in the temple on the day of one of the great Hebrew festivals, suddenly realizing that something unique was happening that would change the direction of his life forever. He was one of many worshipers that day, but what he saw and experienced was utterly different from anything that happened to anyone else. Isaiah experienced more than his own poetic images could possibly describe.

The prophet experienced the presence of God in a way that lifted him up, separated him from other human beings, and commissioned him to deliver a strange and disturbing message. His first reaction was terror, not confident acceptance. Hebrew people believed that no one could see God and live. Thus, Isaiah cried out, “I am lost” (v. 5).

To Isaiah’s amazement, however, he was not destroyed by what he had seen but cleansed and made ready to serve. He knew in that moment why he had been allowed to live after seeing a vision of God. It is no wonder that he instantly responded when God asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” with an eager “Here am I; send me!” (v. 8).

Sadly, in verses 9–10, Isaiah is given the discouraging picture of what the results of his ministry will be: the people will resist God and remain deaf to God’s word. We need to interpret these words with care. God was not calling Isaiah to drive the people farther away; rather, God recognized from the beginning the hard-heartedness of the Judean people. Confronted by the divine words on the lips of the prophet, the people were forced to take sides for or against the will of God—and God knew they would choose to turn away. In the same spirit, Jesus spoke of himself as a stumbling block (Matt. 21:42–44).

Why did Isaiah go on when there was little hope? The answer is simple. For Isaiah there *was* hope: not in what human beings might do but in God. Even when human beings deny it, history is in God’s hands. God does not give up on us, as individuals or as a community. Thanks be to God!



When has a worship experience made a significant change in your life?

MADE READY FOR SERVICE

It is significant that Isaiah referred to God as “holy” in today’s focus text. In its most basic sense, the Hebrew word *qadosh* (kah-DOSH) refers to a spatial relationship; a person or thing is separate or set aside. A bowl that is holy is one that has been set aside to be used in ritual acts; it is not used for anything else (Exod. 40:1–15). Garments worn by the priests in their temple service were holy and could not be worn at any other time. A holy person was set apart from normal duties to serve the Lord. The nation itself was holy in the sense that it was set apart from other peoples to be the community of God. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the Lord was viewed as being that which was the most holy, of being different than human beings—set apart, high and lifted up, outside human comprehension.

Isaiah himself could not *be holy* (set aside for God’s service) until he *was made holy* by becoming ethically and morally pure. The implied message is that those who claim the name of God’s people must reject evil, uphold justice, and do righteousness. Only then can they be holy as God is holy.

When confronted with the holiness of God, Isaiah became aware not only of his sinfulness but also of the sinfulness of the people. He immediately followed this insight with confession, much like the order of worship in today’s churches. Many worship services include a call to confession, a prayer of confession, and an assurance (or declaration) of pardon before Scripture is read and God’s word is proclaimed. In this way, the people of God prepare themselves to worship God as a forgiven people.

In addition, Isaiah’s cleansing process involved the part of the body most prominent in worship: the lips. With the lips, people preach, teach, sing, pray, and otherwise express themselves in response to God’s holiness. Touched by a burning coal, Isaiah’s lips were pronounced cleansed, his guilt was taken away, and all his sin forgiven. Now Isaiah was ready to hear his own call in God’s asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

Faced with this momentous question, Isaiah volunteered himself. Without being specifically requested to do so, he accepted the challenge to go and do whatever God wanted—no strings attached, no questions asked. As a result, God immediately said “Go!,” which is just what this new prophet did.



**When have you felt called to serve God in a particular way?
How did this call come to you?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

How do we answer God's call positively and faithfully? How do we find and commit to our own unique ways to serve? No magic formula emerges from the biblical record, but a few guiding principles can be observed.

First, Scripture speaks of being in an attitude of worship at all times: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). Jesus added to these words when he said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27).

Second, Isaiah's visionary experience was no doubt initiated by the events taking place in the temple, the worshipful acts of a person seeking communion with God. God speaks to believers today in many ways: through Scripture, through the inner "still, small voice," through the fellowship of Christian community, and through life circumstances. Isaiah was so tuned in to the worship of God that he was convinced of his need to volunteer to do God's will. Those who stay close to God are more likely to hear and respond to the divine voice.

Volunteer work often provides an outlet for imagination, creativity, and challenge, while fulfilling the need many adults have to find a sense of purpose for their lives. Individuals have different needs at different times, affected by age, interests, family responsibilities, available time, energy, and other factors. What one person may find fulfilling, another may find a chore. One person may find keeping the nursery a wonderful experience. Whereas a parent who is around young children twenty-four hours a day may be willing to help anywhere but the nursery!

Isaiah took initiative, yet most volunteers today are recruited. When adults are asked to work for various worthy causes, many have difficulty setting priorities. What can be done to motivate a person to accept a volunteer role? Consider what needs exist and what needs to be done and how a person can contribute. Success will be greater if a person's responsibilities can be matched to their interests and talents. Some people like to serve the church in ways related to their professional careers. Others prefer a change of pace.

To paraphrase Frederick Buechner: We find our calling when and where the world's need meets our passion.¹

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 119.



How does your church recruit and use volunteers? To what extent are your own gifts dedicated to God's work?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. In the eighth century BCE, King Uzziah (Judah, the Southern Kingdom) and King Jeroboam II (Israel, Northern Kingdom) reigned during great but unequal prosperity. Amos (North) and Isaiah (South) criticized the concomitant social abuses contemporaneously. Isaiah's career spanned the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Amoz, and Hezekiah.
2. Isaiah's call occurred in the year Uzziah died (ca. 740 BCE). His vision opens his eyes to YHWH's heavenly temple. The vision probably took place in Solomon's Temple at the entrance (curtain, "the hem of his robe") to the holy of holies, which housed the ark of the covenant, the throne of God (see 1 Kgs. 8:6–8). The six-winged seraphs cover their eyes and "feet" (nakedness), for no one can look upon the Lord and live or enter the presence of God unclothed.
3. Isaiah 7 is set during the Syro-Ephraimite War (734–733 BCE); cf. 2 Kings 16:1–20. Syria and Israel (Ephraim) are in league against Judah, and Judah's King Ahaz is afraid. Unwilling to trust in God's protection, he seeks an alliance with Assyria, which will result in Judah becoming a vassal state of the Assyrian empire.
4. God's sign to Ahaz (Isa. 7:14): by the time a child ("God with us," perhaps Isaiah or Ahaz's child) born to an already pregnant woman (not "virgin") is fully weaned, the threat from Syria and Israel will dissipate (v. 16). However, the king of Assyria will bring violence and destruction (vv. 17–20).
5. Isaiah 20 recounts the advance of Sargon of Assyria on Judah after defeating Israel (Samaria, the Northern Kingdom) in ca. 711 BCE. YHWH instructs Isaiah to perform a prophetic act ("a sign and a portent") as a warning to King Hezekiah and Judah against entering an alliance with Egypt and Ethiopia (who will find themselves naked and enslaved) against Assyria.