

## MEN AND WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

NCTM Thursday a.m. Class. 19th August 1993. G.C. Bingham

Third Term Course: Men and Women of the Bible

### *Study Five: Isaiah, Prophet of Holiness*

**Introduction: Isaiah 6:1-13.** In this passage we see the prophet in the temple. He has a vision of the Lord, and is deeply moved. A conviction of his own uncleanness and the defilement of his people comes to him. In agony because of this revelation of evil he cries out in agony, and is visited by a heavenly creature who relieves him of his misery by the grace of God. He is then ready to hear God's call to preach to the nation, although that call is to bring increasing hardness of heart and rejection of his evangel. Even so, the new, holy remnant will result, and God's salvation history will proceed in pioneer.

#### **The Vision of God's Holiness**

Sometimes this 6th. chapter has been titled 'God's Call to Isaiah', and undoubtedly it was a particular call, but it seems certain that Isaiah was already called to be a prophet, and had so worked. It seems that King Uzziah was a friend to the prophet, and it has been thought by some that the two were so close that Isaiah desperately missed his friend, and being lonely and anguished in spirit, went to the temple to pray. We cannot be sure of this was the reason. What we do know is that he had a brilliant but terrifying experience of God's holiness<sup>1</sup>. All the elements of transcendent holiness are present in 'high and lifted up', the celestial seraphim- 'the burners' -in holy praise, worship and service, hiding their eyes from Him, the song of God's holiness- the Trishagion— and the shaking of the foundations of the thresholds. In that moment all of the prophet's knowledge of God would have come to life, especially from the message with its components of holiness, reference to the Lord of Hosts, and "the whole earth is the fulness of His glory' (cf. Numb. 11:21; Psa. 72:19; Hab. 2:14). The experience was **not merely noetic but flooded Isaiah** in every part of his being.

#### **The Response to, and Result of, God's Holiness**

The prophet is terrified and only he who has had a similar experience could understand<sup>2</sup>. In Exodus 33:20 God had told Moses, 'You cannot see my face and live'. In the RSV Isaiah is presented as saying that as a person of unclean lips he is lost 'for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts,' whilst the NRSV has 'yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.' He is certainly saying he is finished for ever because as a person he has seen God, but in the NRSV he seems to be marvelling that an unclean person can see the holiness of God. For our part we shiver with dread to think of such a thing happening to us. We do not need to be told that God is Holy. Here we *know* it!

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We observe that such an experience would—one way or another change a person.

<sup>1</sup> Some commentators of John 12:37-41 believe that John was saying that 'the Lord of Isaiah 6:1 was the one who became Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnated Word and Son of God, and that it was not Yahweh, as such who was seated on the throne. This could well be the case.

<sup>2</sup> Jessie Forsyth Andrews, the daughter of Peter Taylor Forsyth wrote a memoir of her father when his *The Work of*

*Christ* was republished after his death in which she says that a change took place in her father about the time he preached

on 'The Holy Father'. Later Forsyth tells something of this; 'It pleased God by the revelation of His holiness and grace

... to bring home to me my sin in a way that submerged all the school questions in weight, urgency and poignancy. I was

turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace.'

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### **The Grace of God to the Heart of Isaiah**

In verses 6-7 the story is told. The seraphim comes with a white hot coal from the altar of sacrifice and touches the mouth of the prophet, saying, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.' The NRSV has it, '. . . your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.'<sup>3</sup> Now the prophet is pure from the propitiating holiness of God Himself. He can be in the Presence of the LORD of Hosts and not be in horrific guilt of pollution.

In verse 8 we read, 'And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?"' 'It seems that in the moment of his purification and great relief the voice of the Lord is heard. To this question the prophet undoubtedly replies eagerly. Why eagerly? Because his life has been transformed. His desire to do the will of God from the heart is full. His yearning to be as one with his Holy Redeemer Lord is intense. He now has a message to give—the good news of God! He replies, 'Here am I! Send me.'

### **The Transformed Prophet and the Difficult Proclamation**

Verses 9-13 spell out the preaching the prophet must do and the message he must give. Quoted four times in the Gospels (Matt. 13:14-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8: 10; John 12:39-41), once in the Acts (28:26-27) and in Romans 11:8, the principle is that the preaching of the prophetic word will dull the understanding of the hearers and so it will be rejected, and this will bring justifiable judgement to the land until it is only a stump that remains, but then the stump will constitute 'the holy seed', that is, the 'holy remnant' which may henceforth grow as in 11:1 ff. In other words the task of the prophet will be difficult<sup>4</sup>.

### **Isaiah as a Man of God**

Textual critics of Isaiah say the prophecy of Isaiah is in fact a number of prophecies written by a number of authors. Others say there is strong evidence it is a but one prophecy. Whatever the theories the fact remains that the Book is one permeated with the holiness of God, alive with good news, vibrant to the core and filled with evangelical joy and promise. A tradition from the 2nd century AD says that Isaiah was placed in the trunk of a tree and sawn downwards in half. Whatever the case may be, his writings have been the source of great wonder and delight to true readers. The man was not only a great prophet, not only had disciples that followed him, and not only brought a brilliant revelation of God but he was also a great statesman in the land. Isaiah has taught us the holiness of God and His redemption. Only when 'the mysteries of God' are opened to us, can we open them to others. Only he to whom these mysteries have been opened can reveal them as the truth, with power and reality.

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<sup>3</sup> The NEB has '. . . your iniquity is removed and your sin is wiped away'.

<sup>4</sup> Some commentators think that the whole idea is the total annihilation of Israel, and that no remnant will remain.