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The Making of a Servant of God

Isaiah 6:1-7, In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

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

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

If we could go back to 780 B.C., Nineveh, at one moment in the life of the prophet Jonah, we’d be amazed how He boldly walked the streets of the city proclaiming the word of God. He no doubt confounded any and all who might have opposed him. The Lord in turn used the seemingly feeble efforts of this man to turn the entire city around reaching the house of the King (Jonah 3:6-9)! What Jonah did and the ease with which he did it no doubt would amaze us, and perhaps even move us to envy, “I wish I had his ministry! What glorious fruit! I’d love to be used by God in this way!”

Yet we know the whole story, don’t we? What we read in Jonah 3, the success, the fruit, the impact, the ease was the culmination of the disciplining work of the Lord by which He placed the prophet in a crucible, heated it beyond imagination, and so produced an effective instrument for His glory. All of the sudden we don’t want this life! Yet when it comes to God raising up Kingdom Servants, the life of Jonah is not the exception, but the rule. Consider:

- Abraham was sent to live by faith in a strange land for 30 years before any fruit would be seen.
- Joseph spent years in slavery.
- Moses was exiled to the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years.
- Hosea’s training would be through the providence of a bad marriage.

Paul speaking of Ananias said this:

Acts 9:15-16, “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.’”

And such training is what each of us ought to expect as servants of God. On his first missionary journey, Paul endeavored to:

Acts 14:22, “...strengthen... the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’”

In fact, Paul couldn’t be say it clearer when he wrote this:

Philippians 1:29-30, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.”

From this we conclude that the training Paul underwent for the ministry is the training we too will undergo! In fact, Peter used the imagery of a crucible to describe how God prepares the vessels He deigns to use (1 Peter. 1:6-7)! If you are a servant of Christ then you have been enrolled in a training program by which Christ intends to make you into a servant of God.

- What does this school involve?
- What is its duration?
- What can we expect as students in this school?

We can expect the same thing that Isaiah received as a prophet in God’s Kingdom. Yet it is far more than the calling of this particular prophet; as we’ll see it reflects the elements involved in the making of every servant of God. Let’s consider these elements one by one, beginning with the forge.

The Forge

Isaiah 6:1a, “In the year of King Uzziah’s death...”

While on the surface this statement appears to be rather simple, a king died, nevertheless what is written here was an enormous statement. Recall some of the history:

- If we considered all of the kings who sat on the thrones of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Uzziah would be one of the greatest if not the greatest king.
- He reigned 52 years at a time when all external foes were in decline. As such, the only threat came from the “hereditary enemies” of Judah like the Philistines, Aramaeans, Hittites and the like- all of which Uzziah subdued. In fact, peace was so certain at this time that Uzziah dismissed the standing army which in other generations served as the “minute men” for protection and battle.
- Uzziah improved the capital city of Jerusalem such that it became a fortified city, well equipped with arms for its own defense. In Palestine, there was no more secure place to live!
- According to 2 Chronicles 26, the king developed agriculture and commerce such that Judah became extremely prosperous. In fact, at this time Uzziah established a port for commerce on the Red Sea. He initiated many construction projects in the form of walls, towers, and fortifications (2 Chronicles 26:3-5, 8-10, 13-15)- all for the security and welfare of the people.
- Unlike many of the other powerful and politically successful kings both of Israel and Judah (think of Jeroboam II), Uzziah was a genuine servant of God who loved the Lord. Yes, the end of his career was tainted by an episode of pride by which he was afflicted with leprosy! But this ought not to take away from the incredible blessing Uzziah’s regency would have meant for those who genuinely loved the Lord. For at this time, the genuine service of Christ was encouraged and aided even though Baalism and apostasy also thrived!

The result is that Uzziah had become a national hero and so the object of the people’s hope, confidence, security, and joy! So long as their “Lord” was on the throne, all was well! But then Uzziah died and everything changed!

Five years before Uzziah died, Tiglath-Pileser (the ambitious warrior king of Assyria) appeared on the horizon in the near east. Dr. John MacArthur put it this way speaking of this Assyrian king:

He had a grand design to conquer all the kingdoms between the Euphrates and the Nile and to establish in their place the great Assyrian empire. Naturally all of the target nations, the nations that were imperiled by his designs, began to seethe with apprehension and revolts broke out. They began to form alliances against Assyria. They began to plot political intrigues and sabotage

and rebellion. The kingdoms of Samaria and Judah were tottering on the brink of doom.
(MacArthur)

Furthermore as the sin of apostasy and mysticism goes, by the end of Uzziah's reign the nation as a whole had turned its back on God and was pursuing the gods of pleasure, experience, and temporal fun. In fact when the threat of Assyria eventually materialized, Isaiah called upon the nation to repent and turn to God. But they had other plans.

Isaiah 22:12-13, "Therefore in that day the Lord God of hosts, called *you* to weeping, to wailing, to shaving the head, and to wearing sackcloth. Instead, there is gaiety and gladness, killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die.'"

Amazing! Instead of being humbled and mourning, God's people said, "Let's live it up! It may all end tomorrow!" That was the "State of the Nation" toward the end of Uzziah's reign. And this meant that with Uzziah's death, both the external and internal threats which Uzziah kept at bay were now free to ravish the nation and those with any sensitivity to the Lord knew it! More than anything, Uzziah was the glue that kept everything in the nation from going apart at the seams! Accordingly this man's death meant the death of hope, confidence, security, and joy!

In fact, as I read many commentaries on this passage I kept thinking about the times in my ministry when tragedy struck.

- There's the awful sinking in the chest which is indescribable.
- There are the sleepless nights, the unending tears, and the grief!
- You walk around in a daze with an ever growing numbness to life.

Have you ever been there? That is where Isaiah 6 places the nation of Judah, which no doubt is why Isaiah (most likely with many devout Jews), upon hearing of the news of Uzziah's death, went to the temple. They were overburdened and overwrought! Life would never be the same, and they knew it!

This is the forge or the crucible in which God places the would-be servant of the Lord. It is a place of spiritual, moral, and physical bankruptcy where all earthly coping mechanisms are proven to be failures! Think of it! Isn't that where God brought:

- Gideon when his army was whittled down to 300 men?
- Paul when Satan was loosed to thwart him?
- The disciples in the upper room?
- Abraham and Sarah- to the place of "hope against hope"?
- David when he was driven out of Israel?
- The disciples on the Road to Emmaus?
- Even Christ, when He was driven by the Holy Spirit into in the wilderness?

"The Forge" in which God matures the Christian and equips him for service is a place where self-trust, man-trust, and earthly-trust are placed in their proper light! And this is where God will bring you in

your walk- if He hasn't already. Count on it!

The Fire

Now forges require fire. What, in the case of the Servant of God, is the fire?

Isaiah 6:1b, "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne..."

There is an important play on words here that is not readily seen in the English. The word that Isaiah used here for "Lord" is NOT יהוה (*Yhvh*) which we'd expect in a context where a sinner saw God

Almighty, BUT אֲדֹנָי (*Adonai*) the word used at the time and even today in Israel as a title of honor for kings and those in authority. Is Isaiah here being irreverent in using this word as the name for God? No! He is *showing us* a discovery that he made when he went into the temple upon the news of the death of Uzziah.

All of his life growing up Isaiah would have viewed Uzziah as his "Lord" (אֲדֹנָי [*Adonai*]) the sovereign one who would ever and always protect the people of God. Yet around 740 B.C. Isaiah's Lord died, and the soon-to-be-prophet as well as the nation were devastated! So Isaiah, not as a prophet, but just a devastated Israelite, went to the temple to pray. As he arrived, he obviously saw the temple court where Uzziah's empty throne had been placed in tribute to their fallen king. But then, in a moment, everything changed! And there God sat on the throne! The scales fell off, "*Uzziah wasn't the Lord... here is the Lord!*" Thus we could translate verse 1 this way: "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the REAL Lord sitting on a throne..." Now the entirety of Isaiah's description from vv. 1-4 revolves around the Holiness of God, the fact that God is transcendent and so different from anything and everything on this earth...

Isaiah 6:1b-4, "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke"

Again this passage is given to describe the holiness of God.

Isaiah 6:1b, "...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted..."

That God manifested Himself to Isaiah as "sitting on a throne" conveys the idea that God is both the judge and so the determiner of all that occurs in this world. That he was "lofty and exalted" denotes his grandeur. In fact, so great was/is this One seated before Isaiah that:

Isaiah 6:1c, "...the train of His robe fill[ed] the temple."

In ancient days, the glory of a king was reflected in the length of the fabric that flowed from his royal robe. Great kings might have 10 to 20 attendants carrying the robe. In this passage, "the train of

God's robe" filled the temple! In other words, never before or since has there been a king like this! So great is God that "the train of his robe filled the temple" there was no place to stand where you wouldn't risk stepping on it!

Isaiah 6:2a, "Seraphim stood above Him..."

In the ancient world, kings had magnates and retinue which stood beside them and so "above them." They were charged with various and sundry responsibilities. Well in Isaiah's vision, God was seen to be served by a multitude of creatures all of the same order, "Seraphim." The "Seraphim" [literally "burning ones"] are an order of angels whose calling and design is to attend to God's holiness. Alec Motyer wrote this:

Fire is the chief symbol of the holiness of God (Exod. 3:2-5; 19:18). Suitably, therefore, in this context Isaiah gives the heavenly attendants a title that matches their situation: with their down-folded and up-stretched wings they look like huge flames surrounding the throne of the Holy One. (Motyer, 1993, p. 80)

From this we conclude that Seraphim are fiery guardians of the holiness of God, a calling reflected in their design.

Isaiah 6:2b, "Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face [present tense which means they never took them away], and with two he covered his feet [once again, the present tense is employed], and with two he flew [another present tense]."

What a strange looking creature. Yet notice when God makes anything, there always is a purpose behind the function! Accordingly if these angels have six wings you know there is going to be a reason for each set. Consider:

- Two of the wings were used to "cover their face"- the idea behind this is that God is so great that even sinless beings resembling the fire of God's holiness are not able to look upon God!
- Another set of wings were used to "cover their feet"! According to Biblical anatomy, the feet of a creature were viewed as tainted as this is where contact was made with an earth tainted by sin. This is why Jews washed their feet prior to meals. It symbolized the removal of daily sin- which is the idea behind...

1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us [that is the foot washing] from all unrighteousness."

Now while "Seraphim" do not have sin, nevertheless God gave them a set of wings to cover that which represented contact/interaction with a sinful world. And so again, the emphasis here is on the Holiness of God!

- Finally, the remaining two wings were used "to fly"- this embodied their service.

So ministering in the presence of God were Seraphim whose anatomy reflected and proclaimed the holiness of God. And what was their ministry? It was to proclaim an important message.

Isaiah 6:3, “And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory’”: if you think about this verse, it really is incredible. Right now there is a created order in glory whose work it is to hover around God and antiphonally cry for eternity, “Holy! Holy! Holy! Is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory!”

It is unimaginable! What is the significance of the thrice cry, “Holy!”? As we have discussed, Biblical Hebrew didn’t have punctuation marks which could be used to indicate emphasis. Accordingly, emphasis was indicated by word placement, order, or repetition.¹ Here the thrice holy cry indicates emphasis- in fact, one commentator identified this as a super-superlative! IOW, if there is anything you are going to believe about God or conclude about God, you must believe that He is holy! Well, what is this? What is holiness? The attribute of “holy” tells us not so much what God is, but what He isn’t! Holy means “separate,” “different,” or “other.” It indicates that whatever is being spoken about is completely different from anything you and I have ever seen or known. In reference to God it indicates that, as the Creator, He is not creation nor is He of creation. Accordingly, we have an idea of what love looks like and feels like. Yet because God is holy, His love is unlike anything of this world. We have an idea of what justice is. Yet again, because God is holy, His justice is unlike anything of this world.

And so it is when we speak of God’s purpose, plan, priorities, grace, mercy, judgment, and everything else about Him. He is outside of creation, above it and beyond it! Now notice the angels said that “the whole earth is full of His glory.” In other words, while God is transcendent and so outside of creation, nevertheless He also is near to each of us. Isaiah beautifully captured this when he later would write this:

Isaiah 12:6, “Cry aloud and shout for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

It is this truth that is proclaimed here.

Isaiah 6:3, “And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.’”

What do they mean by “glory”? Behind the translation is the Hebrew word, **כְּבוֹד** (*kā·bôd*), which is a term in Hebrew to denote that something is heavy or has substance. It is the opposite of “vanity” which is used when things have no substance and so are light, wispy, or airy. And so when used of God, “glory” indicates that God is a God of substance and therefore can be trusted, relied upon, spoken with.

Isaiah 64:4, “For from of old they have not heard nor perceived by ear, neither has the eye seen a God besides Thee, who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.”

That’s the idea here! Unlike the false gods of the nations which could never do a thing for its worshipper, our God acts, answers, helps, aids, protects, secures, saves, etc. There is no god like this in all of creation. The gods of the nations are impotent; in contrast, our God is glorious! In fact,

notice the impact that God's presence had on the temple in which He was in session.

Isaiah 6:4a, "And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him² who called out."

In the Bible, the "breath" of God is that which:

- Brought the world into being (Psalm 33:6).
- Parted the Red Sea (Exodus 15:8).
- Gives life (Job 32:8).
- Inspired Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

And that's just His whisper. Imagine if He spoke! Well Isaiah was privy to a moment when God spoke, and do you know what happened? The structure in which Isaiah knelt trembled at the words- it violently shook! It was like as an erupting volcano, a massive earth quake! So great is our God! And yet there was more.

Isaiah 6:4b, "And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke."

In the Bible, "smoke" typically accompanied the manifestation of the glory of God. Isaiah described the glory that awaits us in the New Heavens and Earth and thus he wrote this:

Isaiah 4:5, "Then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy." (cf. also Exodus 33:9)

Accordingly, that "smoke" accompanied the vision of Isaiah tells us that what was beheld was NOT a part of creation (~a messenger speaking on behalf of God), BUT the Lord Himself! Behold the forge and the fire in which God places His children to raise them up as servants in His Kingdom:

- It begins by the devastation of every false-hope and trust that we the sinner might have in this life.
- It is heated and so brought to glow by the manifestation of the glory of God personally to us!

That is what transformed Isaiah from being a worried, tentative, man-fearer into a prophet set ablaze for God! In fact would you notice, what Isaiah saw here so transformed him that his favorite expression in this prophecy is "the Holy One of Israel." He uses it 26 times!

Now you must see that the way Isaiah penned this prophecy, it is understood that the description of the transformation of Isaiah in this text was intended to be typical of what God would do to the nation if only they would seek the Lord! I have to quote from another commentary:

The people to whom [Isaiah] was sent were the heirs of great promises but appear to have forfeited them. By the end of his prefatory chapters [chapters 1-5], darkness has closed in upon

them. Grace has been exhausted; nothing but judgment lies ahead [Uzziah just died and the nation is in love with its sin]. ¶ As we shall see, this is the position which Isaiah sketches in a very dramatic way in 6:1, but by the end of this section, darkness (6:1) has been replaced by singing (12:2, 5) and salvation (12:2–3), and the Lord in all his holiness (6:1–3) is dwelling in Zion in the midst of his people (12:6). Darkness and judgment, then, do not, after all, have the last word. Far from it, for the very promises that appeared to have been forfeited- the David-promises of 1:25–27 and the Zion-promises of 4:2–6- are the very things that come to pass (9:1–7; 11:1–9; 12:1–6). The exhausting of grace (5:4) has been superseded by the triumph of grace. (Motyer, 1993, p. 76)

This is the story of redemption and hence the plot and story-line of what your life is going to follow! This is the forge and the fire in which God raises up His servants and will raise up you!

There is an incredible pun in Isaiah 7 which I'm only going to reference in this context. Recall in Isaiah 6:4, the weight of the glory of God "shook" the temple violently! Well in Isaiah 7 we read of another "shaking."

Isaiah 6:2, "When it was reported to the house of David, saying, 'The Arameans have camped in Ephraim,' his heart and the hearts of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake with the wind."

The force of the Hebrew pun serves to challenge the reader with this question, "Christian! What is it that shakes you?"

- God? Or Man?
- The plans of an evil king? Or the purpose and will of the Lord?
- The opinion of man? Or the will of Almighty God?

It is God's plan through His providence to transform each of us such that we are not shaken by the things of this life, but moved, humbled, and transformed by the weightiness and substance of God! This is what is behind all that God is doing in your life today! The question is, "Will you get in line with God's program?" Will you bow the Knee to Christ? Will endeavor to behold His glory, "the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)? And so, will you be moved/shaken in this life by the greatness of Christ alone?

End Notes

¹ For example, "pure gold" (2 Kings 25:15) is used to translate what in the Hebrew literally is, "gold gold"; or "full of tar pits" (Gen. 14:10) is how we translate what in the Hebrew literally is, "pits pits."

² There is debate as to the source of the voice. Calvin contends that the voice here came from God. Motyer differs. My comments are based on Calvin's assumption.

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About the Preacher

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