



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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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."

## **The Toy Boat and the "Bully"**

You all probably have heard of the story of the boy with the toy boat which got away from him at the city pond. As he sat on the shore willing his boat to float back to him in tears, an older boy surveyed the situation and began taking large rocks and throwing them at the toy boat. The younger child stared in anger as this older "bully" attempted to sink his boat! Yet before he knew it, the younger child had his boat in his hands. It turns out that the older child wasn't trying to sink the boat. Rather with the rocks, he was creating waves on the far side of the toy to push it to shore.

And so it is with the working of God in the formation of kingdom servants. At first it may be completely misunderstood. Yet when we come to understand the process, we embrace it!

So when it comes to the producing of Servants of the Lord: How does God do it? What is God's method? What is His plan?

Using the metaphor of the forge, we saw that God molded Isaiah into a servant of the Lord.

Isaiah 6:1, "In the year of King Uzziah's death..."

On account of the special place that Uzziah held in the hearts of God's people, this was a big deal. He who had been the basis for so much hope, confidence, and security died! Accordingly Isaiah along with the entire nation were beside themselves. As such, they flocked to the Temple in order to pray and grieve.

From this we saw the forge in which God readies His servants for ministry by the dethroning of idols and false gods! This is a work that God is ever and always doing in our lives. Remember the statement Paul made regarding what we are about as servants of Christ?

2 Corinthians 10:5, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God..."

A large part of Christianity is the dethroning of idols; that is, anything and everything raised up against Christ. And that is what God was doing in Isaiah's day!

## **The Fire**

Isaiah 16:1, "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."

The text continues through verse 4 by which God brought Isaiah to a more accurate view of the Lord. This is the fire which makes the servant of Christ malleable! Did you get that? It is not the trials and

difficulties of life, tragedy or ruin. Rather it is a growing apprehension of the greatness of God and so His glory. If you want to grow in grace? Set your heart on the pursuit of the glory of God in Christ!

This brings us to the question: How hot does it have to get? What temperature must be reached before molding and shaping can take place? With this we considered the temperature needed to ready the vessel so that it could be formed.

Isaiah 6:5, “Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’”

This reflects the “temperature” necessary for the forging of God’s servants! And what is that temperature? Recall, it is that which is necessary to melt:

- The heart of stone.
- Our wayward will.
- Our fear of man.
- Our love of sinning.
- Our self-dependence and self-sufficiency!

This is a third element in the process the Lord uses to make a servant of God! Now with this, the servant of God is now ready to be formed!

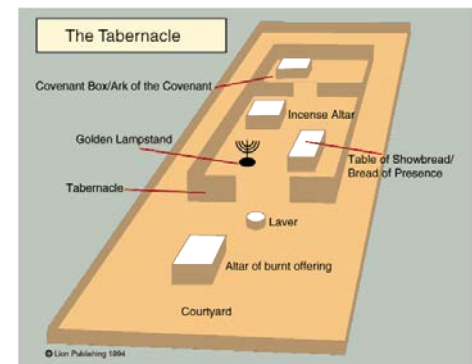
## The Forming

Isaiah 6: 6-7, “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth *with it* and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.’”

There is enough ambiguity in the English translation that it is quite easy to misunderstand this passage, which many do. The nature of forming is given to us by the three words in Isaiah 6:6.

Isaiah 6:6, “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs.”

To understand this, consider the picture of the temple/tabernacle. As one entered the temple from the east side, you first would be confronted by the Altar of Burnt Offerings where the sacrifices were placed. Behind this was the Laver a vessel filled with water which the priests used to cleanse themselves ceremonially before entering into the Holy Place. Beyond this was the Holy Place which had three articles: (1) the Golden Lampstand, (2) the Table of Showbread, and (3) the Altar of Incense. Then beyond this was the Holy of Holies which housed the Ark of the Covenant as well as the Mercy Seat.



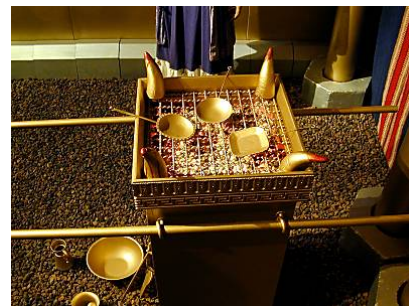
Now upon a first glance at Isaiah 6, it appears that a “burning coal” from the Altar of Burnt Offering was taken by a Seraph in order to cleanse in some way Isaiah from His sin. Yet that is not what happened. Notice the key words used here:

1. Tongs: מֶלְקָחַיִם (*melqāḥayim*); with this word, our eye brows begin to raise. These are “burning ones”- Seraphim! Why do they need “tongs”? Well tongs in this context would be used for one of two purposes: either they were used because the element in question was (1) untouchable (it was too hot or too pure) or (2) inaccessible. In the case of the former, what was it about the Altar of Burnt Offering that required a creature which had no sin and who were themselves burning/on fire to use tongs? It is rather odd.
2. Burning coal: רִצְפָּה (*riṣpâ*); the word used here is NOT the word for a burning coal, BUT a stone/a rock! For example, the word is used in 1 Kings.

1 Kings 19:6, “Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake *baked on* hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again.”

Elsewhere the word is used in reference to pavement (Esther 1:6; Ezekiel 40:17–18; 2 Kings 16:17). In fact, the *Vulgate* translates this word as calculus a word used to denote a small stone used for counting. So why do most Bible translations say, “live coal” or “burning coal”? The translators made the assumption that the Seraph took a coal from the Altar of Burn Offering which would have indeed been a “burning coal.” Yet there was another altar in the Temple/Tabernacle besides the altar of Burnt Offering. This was the Altar of Incense.

3. Altar: מִזְבֵּחַ (*mizbēah*); notice the picture I have placed in your notes of this altar. It was made of acacia wood and overlaid with pure gold (Exodus 30:3). It stood square measuring 1 1/2 feet wide and was 3 feet high. God commanded the priests to burn incense on it every morning and evening. The incense was to be left burning continually throughout the day as a picture of the prayers of the people of God. As an item in the Holy Place, it represented another facet of the people’s dedication.



Now you must understand how the incense was burned. It was not placed in a fire on the Altar of Incense. Rather it was placed in a small pan on a grate beneath which were placed burning hot stones.

There is no question that the “burning coal” as translated in the NASB was NOT taken from the Altar of Burnt Offering, BUT from the Altar of Incense. This would make it NOT a “burning coal” BUT a “burning hot stone” which is consistent with the Hebrew. That means the focus in this text is NOT on forgiveness BUT dedication!

What we are talking about here is NOT the cleansing of a man from sin, BUT the preparation of a man for ministry. That is why I have titled this section of Scripture, “The Making of a Servant of God” and not, “The Making of a Christian.” God is active in shaping/Forming of the child of God for service in His Kingdom.

What therefore is the Objective? What is God after at this point?

Isaiah 6:7, “And he touched my mouth *with it* and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips...”

Recognize that what occurred here would have been incredibly painful. God equipped the lips with thousands of nerve endings such that they are one of the more sensitive parts of our bodies. To place a hot stone from the Altar of Incense against them would have meant excruciating pain. This gives us insight into the sanctifying process! With that, what is going on here? Why did the Seraph do this? Some in their treatment of this verse mistakenly look forward to Isaiah 6:8-9 and the commissioning of Isaiah. They say that as THE tool of a prophet is his mouth, God deigned to cleanse this portion of Isaiah in order to prepare the prophet for ministry.

Isaiah 6:8-9a, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’ And He said, ‘Go, and tell this people...”

The problem with this interpretation is that it ignores the preceding context. Recall that when Isaiah stood on the temple mount and was transported to the presence of God via the vision, he immediately was confounded on account of (1) God’s greatness, but also (2) both his and the nations’ sin.

Isaiah 6:5, “Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’”

When Isaiah went to the temple, he went as a genuine worshipper of God. He did not need forgiveness. Yet he obviously went to the temple that day handicapped with a guilty conscience which became critical when he gazed upon the glory of God! *How could he go on? He had a filthy mouth!* It is hard to tell what this references. However, notice a couple of the words:

1. Unclean: is the word used in the Old Testament for ceremonial defilement. Accordingly, either because of what went into his mouth or what came out, Isaiah knew he was ceremonially defiled. What was it?
2. Among a people: based on this statement we conclude that Isaiah’s sin involved other people which means his problem was what came out of his mouth! Based on the culture of his day, most likely Isaiah was one who actively participated in the sins of slander, hatred, and gossip (cf. Jam. 3:9). But again, it is hard to be definitive here!

Now if this obsession was allowed to fester, Satan would have had a foothold in his life by which to restrain and impede his service! So what did God do? He had a Seraph take a stone from the Altar of Incense by which Isaiah’s greatest hindrance- his bad mouth- was set apart/dedicated to the Lord!

Do you see the significance? The hot stone was applied to Isaiah’s lips NOT because this was soon to be his trade, BUT because it was this part of him that served as the greatest threat to unhindered service in God’s Kingdom. It was this concern/burden that had the greatest potential to hold him back in ministry as it clearly was when Isaiah came to the temple that day!

With this we behold the intent behind the forging process of God; the removal of all earthly hindrances to ministry! This is an important part of God’s sanctifying work in our lives. This was one of the objectives Paul had in his ministry to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 7:35, “And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord.”

That’s what Isaiah 6:6 is all about! Do you see? It is NOT a detail of the prophet’s conversion, BUT the removal of the impediments that existed in his life when it came to ministry! E. J. Young put it this way:

To what sin does the seraph refer, and what is the iniquity of which he speaks? He speaks of sin in the ethical sense, sin which could preclude Isaiah from the active service of God. (Young, 1965, p. Vol 1. p. 252 )

Christian, what is holding you back in your service of Christ? You know the forgiveness of Christ, so why aren’t you more devout? Why aren’t you more committed? Why is it that when you hear the call, “Who shall I send?” You say, “Not me!”?

Could it be that there are areas in your life for which you are ashamed? You regret? *If people knew this about me, I could never face them!* This is what is behind the Hebrew writer’s exhortation.

Hebrews 12:1, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

This is the objective of the forging work of God, enabling us to run with endurance the race set before us freed from the encumbrances of sin! So how does God do it? How does He enable us to be rid of these nasty pests?

Isaiah 6:7, “and he touched my mouth *with it* and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.”

First off notice that God employs sacrificial language.

- Iniquity: עָוֹן (*‘āwōn*); the word appears 231 times in the Old Testament and signifies an offense, intentional or not, against God’s law. It is the primary word used in the context of the sacrificial system and so denotes a sin punishable by death!
- Taken away: סָרַח (*sûr*); this is an expression of forgiveness. The guilt which was involved in Isaiah’s iniquity was “turned aside” so that it no longer stood as an obstacle in the path of divine forgiveness!
- Forgiven: כָּפַר (*kāpar*); the word used here is the primary word in the OT for forgiveness. You all know, “Yom-Kippur” (which literally means “day of atonement”)... that is the word used here- כָּפַר (*kāpar*).

Whatever else we might say about this passage, we must see that God here is talking about the

removal of sin on account of sacrifice! Now if we interpret this verse based on the culture and practices of the Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, or Hittites (as do the liberals), we would conclude that the burning (which would have occurred when the hot stone touched Isaiah's mouth) was the basis for the cleansing of sin.

“Behold, this has touched your lips; and thereby your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.”

Yet the infallible rule of interpreting Scripture would NOT have us look to the secular cultures of the nation's surrounding Israel to understand what God was doing. Rather we must interpret this passage in light of the teaching of the rest of Scripture. The infallible rule of Interpreting Scripture is that Scripture Interprets Scripture. When we submit our study to this rule we answer the question quite differently: Why did the Seraph touch Isaiah's mouth with the stone? The stone and the subsequent pain served as a sign of a cleansing that had already taken place! Viewed in this way, the verse would be translated this way:

Behold, this has touched your lips; as a reminder that your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.

It wasn't the stone that cleansed Isaiah from his sin, but a prior sacrifice! The stone and the burning was simply a tangible reminder! In fact, this same relationship exists in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. For example take the Lord's Supper. We participate in this meal NOT to atone for our sin, BUT to be reminded that atonement has taken place. The bread and the wine are a symbol of a greater reality!

So it was when Isaiah's lips were touched by the stone. The burning did not remove the “uncleanness of his lips.” Rather, it pictured the cleansing that already had occurred and so reminded the prophet of the reality of sins already forgiven! Freedom in ministry occurs as we come to a greater understanding of the grace and mercy of Christ! Charles Spurgeon commenting on the Parable of the Prodigal Son captures the essence of the forming process Isaiah 6 when he wrote this:

Oh, the *past*, the past, my father!' he might moan, as he thought of his wasted years; but he had no sooner said that than he received another kiss, as if his father said, 'Never mind the past; I have forgotten all about that.' But then, perhaps, the young man looked down on his foul garments and said, 'The *present*, my father, the present, what a dreadful state I am in!' And with another kiss would come the answer, 'Never mind the present, my boy. I am content to have thee as thou art.' 'Oh, but,' the boy might have said, 'the *future*, my father, the future! What would you think if I should ever go astray again?' Then would come another holy kiss, and his father would say, 'I will see to the future, my boy...' (Spurgeon, pp. Vol 37, page 656)

This is the basis and means by which God forges the Servant of Christ, the applying of the cross work of Christ to any and all hindrances in the life of the child of God! So how does God raise up from among His children a servant of Christ? Well, there is:

- The Forge of the destruction of all idols and lofty things raised up against Christ.
- The Fire of the manifestation of His glory whereby the child God comes to know the greatness

of His God.

- The Fahrenheit which is the temperature needed to soften our hard hearts that we might be malleable.
- And finally there's the Forming, when God removes His chosen instrument from the fire of His glory and begins the slow and grueling process of shaping him, how does He do it? He brings the cross to bear on the sin which so easily encumbers us!

Notice once again the words of the Hebrew writer:

Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us [How are we to do this?], fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith..."

Recall the life of a priest named Joshua, a dramatic event took place. Joshua who already was a servant in the house of the Lord was ever mindful of an impediment to his ministry, his daily sin. Yes he was forgiven! But did he dare stand before God and serve Him knowing the sin in which he had engaged the night before? If Satan had anything to do with it, Joshua wouldn't!

Zechariah 3:1, "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him."

How could this man serve the Lord freely? At every turn he was made aware of his unworthiness on account of his sin! So what did God do? He assured him of the grace of Christ and so removed the obstacle that stood in Joshua's way to faithful service.

Zechariah 3:2-5, "And the Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?' Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. And he spoke and said to those who were standing before him saying, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' Again he said to him, 'See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes.' Then I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while the angel of the Lord was standing by."

What is it that is holding you back in ministry? Why is it that you haven't seemed to progress beyond what you were when you were first saved? Your walk is stagnating. Your heart is cold. Your eyes are dry. It may very well be that you haven't applied the cross-work of Christ to the "sin which so easily entangles you."

You say, "I know the gospel! I know that my sin is forgiven!" Then why as the dog returns to his vomit do you return to your sin again and again? Obviously the fire has not softened your heart enough! Remove the sword from the fire before it is hot enough, and all the pounding in the world will be of little effect in shaping the sword.

The reason many of us hear the gospel over and over again and yet persist in our sin is because we aren't growing in our apprehension of the greatness of God! This is what cheap grace is all about. It is



knowing the cross and seeing your sin and saying, “So what?” Ah, but come to know the greatness of God as did Isaiah and then gaze upon your sin, and you will fly to the cross of Christ for healing, grace, and forgiveness!

May God give us the grace to be about this in our lives.

- Studying/praying/striving to know the greatness of God!
- Studying/praying/striving to know the greatness of our sin as a result!
- Studying/praying/striving to know the grace of Christ!

This is how servants are formed!

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Young, E. J. (1965). *The Book of Isaiah* . Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 10, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.