

Text: Isaiah 6:1-13

Title: "Isaiah's call to ministry"

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Introduction: I was ordained for gospel ministry by the Baptist Church of Danbury in 1992. Part of that process was the presentation and defense of my statement of faith before a council of pastors. The second section of my statement of faith described my call to the ministry. I thought I might begin this morning by reading for you what I wrote then, 33 years ago.

"James warns, 'Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment' (Jam. 3:1). Paul encourages, 'It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do' (1 Tim. 3:1). I have found both truths, the necessity of the call and the necessity of a godly desire, important as I have experienced God's call to the pastorate. I believe my call to the ministry has been more a growth process than a single event, a process involving many experiences which have served to convince me that God desires to use me as a pastor.

"A primary example of these experiences was my willingness as a young person to do whatever God wanted me to do (Rom. 12:1). This willingness has always needed maintenance, but my faith has been that God is interested in using my life for His glory and that His purposes for me are specific and personal (Phil. 2:13). My experience growing up at Bible Community Church under Pastor Ashbrook taught me to highly esteem the pastorate (1 Thess. 5:12-13), and this respect developed into a calling as God directed me to opportunities at my Christian high school, to training at Bible Institute of Ohio and Bob Jones University, to a wife who also is burdened to serve the Lord, and to the opportunity to serve as Assistant Pastor at the Baptist Church of Danbury. One of the best days of my life was the fall day in 1992 when that church ordained me to gospel

ministry. I ‘desire the office of overseer’ because God desires that for me (Phil. 2:13).”

In this chapter, Isaiah is sharing the circumstances of his call to the ministry that the Lord had in store for him. He shares with us the timing of his call, attributes of the Lord who called him, his qualifications as one called, the mission of his call, and its hopeful prospect. We will notice these one at a time.

### I. The timing of Isaiah’s call to ministry (v. 1a).

Illustration: Although I was ordained in 1992 and served the Lord for 11 years as the Assistant Pastor of The Baptist Church of Danbury, I was bi-vocational during that time and at one point decided to accept a job transfer in my secular work that took our family to Arlington, TX. I was out of the ministry and in the business world for a couple of years while we lived in Texas. Then 9/11 2001 happened, and the Lord impressed on my heart the importance again of fulfilling that call that He had placed on my heart as a youth. That event reminded me of the significance of my call.

Application: As Isaiah recounts the significance of his call, he refers to an important event in Israel’s history – the death of King Uzziah in about 740 BC. Uzziah had reigned well for most of 52 years, but to read of his death is to read about the effects of leprosy (see 2 Chronicles 26).

Judah was beginning to slide down the slippery slope of apostasy and godlessness. This is when God called Isaiah. The name *Isaiah* means *Yahweh is salvation*, and the year in which God called him to ministry was a year in which Judah needed the salvation of their God.

It is interesting that unlike other books of the prophets in the Old Testament, Isaiah waits until chapter 6 to tell us about his call. In 6:1 he writes, “I saw the Lord,” but in 1:1 he wrote, “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw.” I think Isai-

ah's organization teaches us that the vision is always more important than the one who saw the vision. The message saves, not the messenger.

And yet, it has pleased the Lord to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching (1 Cor. 1:21). "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17), but "how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" (vv. 14-15). Isaiah was called at this time because Israel needed his preaching about the Savior. We are called to our day and time for the very same reason. New Boston needs a Savior too.

## II. The Lord of Isaiah's call to ministry (vv. 1b - 4).

Illustration: Antiphonal music is music that is performed through the interaction of two musical groups. It may be a majestic brass piece with the trumpets answering to the lower brass in echoing chords, or it can involve two or more voice choirs that join in song.

Application: We are not told how many seraphim are engaged in calling out "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory," but they likely comprise one of the angelic hosts they are referring to when they call their God *the Lord of hosts*. *Seraph* means *burning one*, and the praise that they offer to the Lord was very likely something similar to antiphonal music (v. 3; they cried to one another).

Above all else, the Lord of Isaiah's call to ministry is holy. God's holiness is that attribute of His that characterizes all His other attributes. We know that God is love, but God's love is always a holy love. We also know that God's holiness is not always loving. God's holiness is wrathful, not loving, against sin. Again, His love is always holy; His holiness is not always loving. This attribute of holiness is echoed three times in the seraphim's performance of praise. In Hebrew, a threefold mention is used for emphasis. God is emphatically holy.

Reflect also on the plural pronoun *us* in verse 8. There the voice of the Lord is heard by Isaiah saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The *I* becomes *us* in this call of Isaiah. And students of the New Testament know that John 12:41 tells us that Isaiah saw the Son of God and that Acts 28:25 tells us that it was the Holy Spirit speaking to Isaiah in this passage. The God who calls Isaiah is both *I* and *us*, one God and three persons, the Trinity.

Isaiah saw four things about the holiness of the Trinity: (1) God is holy in His sovereignty – He is on the throne of heaven where He rules over all; (2) God is holy in His sanctity – He is in the temple of heaven, separate from all evil and sin; (3) God is holy in His transcendence – He is high and lifted up, not common or vulgar; and (4) God is holy in His exclusivity – His train fills the temple; the threshold shakes and the smoke arises, precluding the entrance of any other.

This is the holy God who has called us to serve Him. How shall we say no? Perhaps, like Moses and Gideon and many others, we might say we are not qualified to serve this holy God, but that brings us to the next truth about Isaiah’s call.

### III. The qualification of Isaiah’s call to ministry (vv. 5-7).

Illustration: Uzziah was a leper for the last ten years of his life. It was his pride that caused God’s judgment to fall on him in this way, and the Lord knew that suffering with leprosy would be a very humbling experience for the once great king. Because of the contagion of the disease, Leviticus 13:45 commanded that whenever a leper ventured out of his home, he had to cry out “Unclean, unclean,” so that people would know to clear the way for him. That would have been a very humbling experience for anyone.

Application: Isaiah uses that same word *unclean* to describe his lips after he sees his holy God and the glorious praise offered Him by the seraphim (v. 5). He knows he is not qualified to do

what the seraphim were doing. His problem was not only his own sin, but also the sin of the nation to which he belonged.

He understood the true nature of his sin and that of his nation, not because he had fixed his eyes on a comparison of himself and his fellow Israelites, but rather on a comparison of himself and the holy God he saw. Moral people, among whom Isaiah could have likely included himself, can miss that they are unclean as they compare themselves with fellow church members or townsfolk. But whenever a man truly sees the holiness of God, he knows he and them are all equally unclean.

Once Isaiah understood the true nature of his sinful condition before our holy God, this God sent his seraph down with a blessing from the temple's altar. The seraph touched the prophet's lips with the altar's coal and explained "your iniquity is taken away and your sin is purged" (KJV).

The word translated *purged* means *to cover*, and it always refers in the Old Testament to the payment that can cover a debt before this holy God. The payment that covered the sin debt of Isaiah is symbolized by the temple's altar. The God of the throne became the Lamb of the altar. His death atoned for Isaiah's sin, and that miracle of salvation qualified Isaiah to proclaim to his nation, "Yahweh saves." Isaiah's one qualification was that he was a sinner saved by grace.

The Apostle Paul put it this way while preaching this good news to his fellow shipmates, just prior to their being shipwrecked on Malta: "For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, saying, 'Fear not, Paul'" (Acts 27:23-24). Paul was told to fear not, that he was qualified to serve, because God had purchased him with His own blood, so that Paul now belonged to Him.

Have we seen that God is holy? Have we seen that we are unclean? Have we been blessed with the touch of the altar of Cal-

vary? Do we believe that Jesus died for our sins and rose again? If so, we too are His; we too can and must serve Him.

#### IV. The mission of Isaiah's call to ministry (vv. 8-12).

Application: The Lord outlines Isaiah's prophetic mission as two responsibilities: (1) tell this people the truth (v. 9); and (2) let the truth do its work of making the heart of this people fat, their ears heavy, and their eyes shut (v. 10). In other words, the true message produces a negative response from the hearts, ears, and eyes of sinful men and women. How long? Isaiah was to do this until judgment fell (vv. 11-12).

The Lord was telling Isaiah the truth that we find often repeated in our New Testament's quotations of this passage, that "wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:13-14).

When the Lord says "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?", He never deceives about the nature of the work He is calling us to do. It is a work that requires us to faithfully say what God tells us to say, and when we do that, God says the hearts of sinners are going to harden, their ears are going to close, and their eyes are going to shut.

Nevertheless, we serve the Lord, it is His work, His mission, and for Him we must say with Isaiah, "Here am I. Send me." His miracle alone can save, and it always does so in spite of a sinner's negative initial reaction to the truth of the gospel. As gospel preachers, our hope is not that we will be well received, but we do have an unshakeable hope as we serve.

#### V. The hope of Isaiah's call to ministry (v. 13).

Illustration: I have mentioned Bryan's bush before. Our former deacon, Bryan Henderson, tried to take out a red thorn bush

from one of our parking lot beds years ago. But it has grown back, and it now even has a little bush offspring growing next to it. I see in the bush a great symbol of perseverance in ministry.

Application: That is the picture painted in this final verse of the chapter. The tree Israel will only have a tenth left after God's judgment falls and the nation is taken captive. And then even that nation will be only a stump of its former glory. But within that stump is a living substance that God calls His holy seed or holy descendant.

The entire Old Testament is about God's promise of this holy seed or descendant. The promise first came to Eve in the Garden of Eden after man's fall. By Isaiah's day, it has reached David, and even Uzziah, David's son (Matt. 1:8-9). The life of that promised holy seed would not fail to bring the day that Mary gave birth to Jesus, the One who would set all things right again. He would save His people from their sins. He would do what Isaiah or any preacher could not do.

He is our hope too as we minister today. His promise to come again shall not fail. "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Tit. 2:11-14).

Conclusion: And so seeing this Lord, hearing His call, and believing in our blessed hope, will we say with Isaiah, "Here am I, Lord. Send me"? One of the Isaiahs of our time, Ron Hamilton, wrote a song that tells us how to answer God's call:

“Lord, I give my life to You.  
Take control each day.  
I will follow anywhere  
Near or far away.

Lord, I want Your perfect will.  
Be my faithful guide.  
I will never be afraid.  
You are close beside.

Let me see my mission field  
All around each day.  
Fill my heart with Jesus' love.  
Use me, Lord, I pray.

Here am I Lord, send me.  
Here am I Lord, send me.  
I will serve You faithfully.  
Here am I Lord, send me.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*