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# The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

## Catholic Scripture Study

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**Memory Verse: Isaiah 6:8**

*And 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.”*

## The Call of Isaiah (6:1-13)

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### I. THE VISION (6:1-8)

#### A. Background

***In the year that King Uzziah died . . .*** Isaiah's ministry began in the year of the death of king Uzziah, somewhere between 742-736 B.C., and continued until sometime into the reign of Hezekiah.

It is reasonable to assume that the year Uzziah died (c. 736 B.C. – 740 B.C. - the date cannot be fixed absolutely) was a turning point in the life and experience of the prophet, since it represents a turning point in the history of Israel.

In the first place, it marks the end of a long and prosperous reign, associated with military successes, impressive building operations, and agricultural advances.

The year of Uzziah's death also marked the beginning of the Assyrian threat, which hung over Israel and Judah for the rest of the century.

For the prophet, of course, Uzziah's long reign represented a time of decadence, and the Assyrian king ***Tiglath-Pileser III*** (745-727)

was the stick with which the Lord of Hosts was going to punish Israel (Is. 10:5).

News of the approaching threat of Assyrian invasion was thus one of the frightening factors in the situation that sparked his visionary experience described in chapter 6.

**Read: Isaiah 6:1-8**

***[1] In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train 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 flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which 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 forgiven."***

***[8] And 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."***

## **B. Overview**

Chapter 6 describes Isaiah's solemn original call to his prophetic ministry at a time when the nation was in turmoil because of king Uzziah's death (c.736 BC).

The first two verses of the chapter do not specifically mention the Temple but later verses suggest that the prophet was in the Temple at the time of this vision.

Isaiah probably went to the Jerusalem Temple to pray as usual, not expecting the type of encounter he was to have with God.

During worship, he experienced a vision in which he sees God depicted as a King on a throne with a long train from his robe that filled the entire Temple.

The vision combines two kinds of experiences, so it functions in two ways in its context. On the one hand chapters 1-5 have raised a serious problem. Sinful, arrogant Israel is going to be the holy people of God to whom the nations will come to learn of God.

But how can this be?

Chapter 6 provides the solution. Sinful Israel can become servant Israel when the experience of Isaiah becomes the experience of the nation.

## **II. ISAIAH'S VISION OF THE ALL-HOLY GOD (6:1-8)**

### **A. The Vision Determines his Ministry**

The vision was clearly fundamental to the entire course of Isaiah's ministry.

- In preparation for such a ministry there must be a vision of God's holiness.

His experience of the Glory, the Majesty, the Holiness, and the Righteousness of God changed him forever and his ministry displayed the sovereign power and holiness of God.

Furthermore it is this experience which explains Isaiah's contempt for, and horror of, any kind of nation or individual which did not give the one, true God the attention and reverence He deserved from His creatures.

### **B. Isaiah sees God! (6:1)**

In his vision Isaiah sees God! A rare and privileged experience for a human being! A man should not be able to see God and live: God told Moses, "*You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live*" (Ex 33:20).

Isaiah sees God sitting on a majestic throne **high and lifted up**, and is filled with awe.

Evidently the veil of the Temple had been removed and there, where the ark should be, is a great throne.

- Here again the absolute sovereignty of God is being stressed. He alone is both King and Judge.

### **C. The Seraphim (6:2-3)**

**Above him stood the seraphim . . .** The seraphim were angels, the attendants and the guardians of the heavenly court.

As Isaiah lies prostrate - his whole consciousness riveted on the immense Being whose presence dominates the Temple - he becomes aware of other beings about the throne.

The servants (seraphim) were standing, while the King was seated. It is not possible to describe these attendants in any complete way. There are said to have **hands, feet, faces**, and **wings**, but nothing more is said of their appearance.

Each of the seraphim had 6 wings: two to cover their faces from the dazzling brightness of God's glory; two to cover their loins ("feet" is a euphemism in Hebrew); and a pair of wings for flying.

### **D. Holy, Holy, Holy (6:3)**

Isaiah hears the seraphim singing antiphonally, that is, singing back and forth to each other (***one called to another***) – one choir to the other.

And what are they singing?

They are singing a liturgical hymn – one of the most familiar in both Jewish and Christian liturgical tradition:

***"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."***

Where have we heard similar words before?

At every Mass just before the Eucharistic prayer, we sing: *Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.*

The liturgical source of this hymn goes right back to its first appearance in the Bible:

- Both here in Isaiah 6, with the seraphim singing it antiphonally, and
- In Revelation 4 where it is being sung ceaselessly by various creatures ***"who fall down before him who is seated on the throne"*** (Rev. 4:10).

### **E. The Holiness of God**

In their hymn, the seraphim are extolling the ***holiness*** and ***glory*** of the Lord of Hosts whose glory fills the entire earth!

- They praise God continually. Their hearts burst forth in praise of His very being.

He clearly is the Lord of all.

In his vision, God is depicted as the thrice holy (***holy, holy, holy***) God – the holiest God of all - the highest form of the superlative available in Hebrew.

- Its use here indicates that Israel's God is the most "godly" of all the gods.

Some have seen a reference to the Trinity in this three-fold repetition of the word "holy."

## **F. Effect of the Vision on Isaiah**

In verse 4 Isaiah describes this incredible theophany (appearance of God). The foundations of the Temple threshold shook, like Mount Sinai when the Lord descended on it in fire (Ex. 19:18), and it was filled with smoke, again like Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18).

In the Bible, smoke often represents the presence of God.

- Isaiah knows that he is in the very presence of Almighty God!

Like Moses, the prophet was close to God, and the experience was shattering.

- The holiness and majesty of God fill Isaiah with a sense of his own unworthiness and that of his people.

Before the glory of the thrice-holy God, Isaiah cries out: ***“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, that dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts”*** (Is 6:5).

Isaiah is overwhelmed and filled with fear by the experience. He experiences the infinite distance between the all-holy God and the sinful creature.

### **G. Unclean Lips (6:5)**

In the presence of the all-holy God, he experiences and acknowledges his own sinfulness and unworthiness. He believes he is doomed to die because he is ***a man of unclean lips, that dwells in the midst of a people of unclean lips . . .***

He is terrified by this realization!

But because God is holy, he can forgive the man who realizes that he's a sinner. Isaiah is cleansed and forgiven as soon as he humbly acknowledges his unworthiness and insignificance before God.

Why is Isaiah so terrified about his ***unclean lips***? Because he is being called to become a mouthpiece for the holy God - to utter God's holy word!

How can holy words proceed from unclean lips?

The purification of Isaiah's unclean lips is accomplished when a seraph takes a burning coal from the altar and touches his lips with it. This action takes away the guilt and forgives his sin and separates him from the sin of Israel.

Isaiah is now prepared for the next step – God's call.

### **H. Whom Shall I Send?**

Now, for the first time, God speaks. Once Isaiah is forgiven, he hears a call from God. God asks for a volunteer.

***“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”***

The question seems to be rhetorical because God has just prepared Isaiah for a special assignment. But, God respects free will – He wants Isaiah's free consent - a consent he gives readily, eagerly.

Isaiah responds: **“Here I am! Send me”** (Is 6:8).

*This response does not simply mean “I am present.” The Hebrew word implies that the respondent will do anything that God wants him to do.*

*Thus when Abraham said, “Here I am” to God and was then asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, this placed Abraham in a dilemma. He does not want to sacrifice his son but he has just agreed to do anything that God asked of him.*

*He could say no, but he would betray himself. He says yes and trusts that God knows what he's doing.*

*Isaiah has just responded that he would do anything that God wants him to do. He responds in obedience.*

Come and See Catholic Bible Study - Isaiah, pg 18

### III. THE COMMISSION (6:9-13)

The prophet receives a shocking commission!

It seems as if God's message is meant to render the people incapable of hearing and understanding the word of God which could move their hearts to conversion.

However, it is rather to tell them that if they fail to listen to the word of God, their hearts will be blinded; they will not be convicted of their sin and, because of that, the sinner will feel no need for repentance and conversion.

The bitter content of the prophet's message is then spelt out to him in two prophecies of judgment: the first declares that is too late for

repentance (vv. 9-10), the second foretells the consequences, that is, destruction (vv. 11-13).

The two are linked by the prophet's sorrowful attempt to intercede for his people - "**How long, O Lord?**" - a cry from the depths of his heart.

**Read: Isaiah 6:9-13**

***[9] And he said, "Go, and say to this people: `Hear and hear, but do not understand;***

***see and see, but do not perceive.'***

***[10] Make the heart of this people fat,***

***and their ears heavy,***

***and shut their eyes;***

***lest they see with their eyes,***

***and hear with their ears,***

***and understand with their hearts,***

***and turn and be healed."***

***[11] Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said:***

***"Until cities lie waste***

***without inhabitant,***

***and houses without men,***

***and the land is utterly desolate,***

***[12] and the LORD removes men far away,***

***and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.***

***[13] And though a tenth remain in it,***

***it will be burned again,***

***like a terebinth or an oak,***

***whose stump remains standing***

***when it is felled."***

***The holy seed is its stump.***

## A. The Message (6:9)

***"Go, and say to this people: `Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.'***

Isaiah's words will make the people deaf and blind and harden their hearts, that is, they will not repent in spite of the prophet's word.

Jesus will quote these words of Isaiah when explaining to his disciples why He speaks in parables to the people when proclaiming the kingdom (see Matt 13:10-15).

- Does God truly not want his people to see and understand their dire condition? Are they pre-destined for destruction?
- Why is God using Isaiah's ministry to do this to his people?

The judgment has been rendered and there is no turning back. Punishment is about to be inflicted. The time for repentance is past.

The only hope of healing for these people is in near total destruction. It is only when all is lost that a glimmer of hope appears. There is no other way.

If these people are allowed to continue as they are, there really is no hope. Their religion is already half pagan, and if they are allowed to continue, they will ultimately be completely pagan and all of the revelation will have been for nothing.

## B. The Holy Seed

But God is not going to allow that to happen, either to his revelation or to his people. So the cleansing must be frighteningly thorough. But afterwards, when the forest has been felled and even the remaining stumps have been burned, one of those stumps will still have life in it.

### C. How Long, O Lord? (6:11)

Devastating by this word (v. 10), Isaiah cries out in dismay: "**How long, O Lord?**" How long will the purification last?

And then comes an even more devastating answer:

***"Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and the land is utterly desolate . . ."***

The answer to Isaiah's cry is not comforting. There will be no reprieve for Judah. God's justice will be carried out to its full extent until the land is desolate and empty. Everything will be destroyed except for a stump with holy seed.

- Despite the tragedy of the desolation, there will come forth a New Judah from the holy seed and from the New Judah shall come the Messiah.

However frequently the people may seem to be destroyed, there shall still be a surviving remnant, and however frequently that very remnant may appear to perish, there shall still be a remnant of the remnant left, and this indestructible remnant shall be the holy seed, the true church (Rom 11:5).

### D. The Judgment (6:11-13)

***And the LORD removes men far away.***

These cities of Judah, now populous, filled with those who now have no time for God, will at that time be utterly desolate, for they will have no inhabitants. They will become ghost cities, no cities at all.

- Most of the inhabitants will be carried off into exile to a far away land.

Historical Note: Several limited deportations in the time of Isaiah finally culminated in the devastating Babylonian Exile.

Isaiah's calling is not to success as the world counts success, but to faithfulness. And because he accepts that difficult commission, we still read his book 27 centuries later.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

The land of Israel was never theirs (the Israelites) to possess as their own. Rather, they possessed it in trust from the true landowner, God.

So long as they remained in God's favor by living lives in keeping with his character, then the land was theirs to develop and to enjoy. But if they ceased to live in obedience to God, the land would vomit them out as it did the Canaanites before them.

All of this would be done by the Lord. However, verse 13 offers a faint but sure ray of hope.

Yes, the desolation would be complete. Not even a tenth part will remain. The nation will be like a forest whose stumps are burned after the trees are cut down.

Yet even from such blasted stumps a shoot can burst forth. So it will be for Judah. Utter desolation is sure, but that desolation is not the end. There will be offspring holy to the Lord, for the Lord is not finished with Israel. God's promise to Abraham to bless the nations through his offspring is not to be forgotten.

This is not to deny or in any way mitigate the force of the judgment, but it is to say that in God's overall purposes judgment is never his last word. Restoration is. Salvation is.

## Preparation for Week 7 - Immanuel

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1. Read Chapter 7 of Isaiah
2. Read Chapter 2 of ***Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah***, and answer questions 8-12.