

The Companion of the Way

by

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CHAPTER SIX

THE HOLY SOVEREIGN (Isaiah 6) - Isaiah

I. THE SETTING -- THE PREPARATION OF THE PROPHET

The spiritual experiences of the men through whom GOD gave His Word provide a fascinating and fruitful study. The writers were chosen and prepared by divine skill to be fitting vehicles for the communication of the message of life. Not only did they pass on the Word in its inspired perfection, but each was wrought to noble sympathy with that which he declared and to adoring contemplation of the One who is the sublime theme of all Scripture. Thus the Word was given, not in mechanical fashion, but through minds radiant with the light of GOD, and through hearts burning with the love of GOD.

So it was with Isaiah. To read through the sixty-six chapters of his prophecy is to pass through the spacious halls of a great portrait gallery and to see on every side fresh glimpses of the majesty and grace of our Lord JESUS. To note but a few, He is the branch of the Lord, beautiful and glorious (4:2); the well-beloved (5:1); Immanuel (7:14); Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty GOD, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace (9:6), the King in His Beauty (33:17); The SERVANT of the Lord, of marred visage, and yet very high (52:13-14); The Man of sorrows (53:3); and the REDEEMER (59:20).

What man was chosen so to lift up CHRIST before our wondering gaze? His own name, meaning, "*the salvation of Jehovah*," is a signpost to the content of his prophecy, and prepares us so that "**with joy shall [we] draw water out of the wells of salvation**" (12:3). The name of the Lord that is so characteristic of his writing -- "**the Holy One of Israel**" -- bids us consider the infinite holiness of Him who wrought our salvation in His Person, in His sufferings, and in all His dealings with the children of men. In comparison with the length of Isaiah's service and the scope of his prophecies, little is revealed touching his life, its privilege or its pain, though often as we listen to the music of his words, sometimes rapid and exuberant, sometimes slow and sorrowful, we are made to feel the emotions that surged through his heart. Of all the path wherein he walked with GOD and knew the faithfulness of His presence little has been told, but one experience has been recorded which embraced within itself *the central features of his*

message, and stamped its impress in his inmost being.

Isaiah's prophecies began in the long reign of Uzziah and continued through those of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. While still a young man, he was given a vision of the Lord Himself and received from His lips the commission to service. This experience brought to fullness his preparation for the prophetic ministry. Thenceforth he spoke as one who had seen the Lord, whose heart had been laid bare in the light of His presence, and whose sin had been purged by the sacrifice of the altar. Thus cleansed and commissioned, and with that sight of surpassing splendor ever treasured in his soul, he entered the long years that stretched before him to speak unflinching and yet meekly of the nation's sins and with holy joy of the Lord GOD who should come to Zion, its MAKER and its REDEEMER.

II. THE REVELATION -- LOFTY THRONE AND LIVE COAL

"In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). The year of the vision was a landmark in Israel's history. Uzziah (meaning "*the strength of Jehovah*") was a monarch **"marvellously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction"** (II Chronicles 26:15-16), and at last he died a leper. The kingly glory of Judah entered upon a fitful decline, and remarkably there was founded about that time the city of Rome, in the zenith of whose power Zion should be **"plowed as a field"** (Micah 3:12). The death of so great a king, and in such condition, would throw its shadow deeply across the life of the young prophet, particularly since he was in no doubt as to the low spiritual state of the nation. In that very year, however, he beheld *the vision that compensated* for all loss. He saw the One whose throne was from everlasting. He saw the Lord, *Adonai*, the sovereign, **"the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy"** (Isaiah 57:15). As befitted His majesty, He was sitting on a throne high and lifted up (or lofty). The scene was set in the temple, and His train, the skirts of His robe of kingly splendor, filled all the palace.

In later years Isaiah was to tell how He whose name was Holy dwells **"in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones"** (Isaiah 57:15). But first he must learn in deeper understanding the holiness of that name and must himself know the reviving of the contrite heart and experience the dwelling with him of the Holy One. So he proceeds to describe what he beheld.

"Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:2-3). In attendance upon the throne, and as a living canopy for it, stood the seraphim. Their name ("burners") witnessed to the awful splendour that surrounded them, *the radiance of that uncreated light* before which they lived and ministered. In that presence they hid their faces with their wings, thus proclaiming the reverence due to the CREATOR; they hid their feet likewise, for they were but creatures, whose existence had no purpose save to fulfill His pleasure; with two of their wings they flew in His service. These things were all in perfect order -- His honor, His pleasure, His service.

Such was their attitude, and like to it was their adoration. Seraph cried to seraph, owning the holiness of the Lord, Jehovah of hosts. The threefold "**holy**" of their homage was more than emphasis; it bore its own testimony to the Trinity of GOD. The title, "**LORD of hosts**," used in the Old Testament from I Samuel onwards, told of One at whose bidding there awaited the unnumbered armies of Heaven. As the darkness deepened over the nation, the title was used more and more, and especially in the postexilic prophets. If His claims were despised on earth, they were honored in Heaven. He reigned amid the hosts of light, and was worshiped and obeyed without intermission. The tense (imperfect) of Isaiah 6:2-3 indicate that the homage and service of the seraphim went on continually. The praise of GOD never ceases in Heaven, as is shown also by the scene yet to be which John saw in the Patmos vision. "**They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come**" (Revelation 4:8).

Of primary importance is the quotation in John 12 of a later verse in this sixth chapter of Isaiah. The apostle writes: "**These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him.**" Therefore, He whom the prophet saw in his vision was our Lord JESUS CHRIST, throned in His rightful glory ere He came to effect redemption. From that majesty He stooped to humiliation and suffering and to the sorrows of the Cross.

Who shall fathom that descending
From His rainbow-circled throne,
Down to earth's most base profaning,
Dying, desolate, alone --
From the Holy, holy, holy,
We adore Thee, O Most High,
Down to earth's blaspheming voices,
And the shout of "Crucify"?

The words of the seraphs looked beyond the sufferings of CHRIST to the glory that should follow and to the time when earth, which saw His advent in lowliness, should see Him come in power and great glory. So certain are the purposes of GOD that Heaven could speak of the future as though already realized. "**The whole earth IS full of His glory**" (v. 3). It is not only that the earth shall be filled with His glory, but that nought else could be its fullness. Where sin had wrought its havoc and death had wielded its pale scepter, only the glory of the Lord JESUS could fill the scene with joy and peace. For this glad day our poor earth waits, and though night's darkest hour is still to come, there shall follow the morning without clouds when sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

"**And the posts of the door** [or, the foundations of the thresholds] **moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke**" (Isaiah 6:4). At its dedication the temple had been filled with the glory of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud (I Kings 8:11). When the temple was made the setting for the appearing of the Lord to Isaiah, the place could scarcely sustain such a manifestation, and *the very foundations swayed* at the seraph's cry. What, then, will this earth do when it is about to see His glory and when His judgments are being poured out? "**The earth shall reel** [same word as 'moved' in 6:4] **to and fro like a drunkard**" (Isaiah 24:20). Because the judgments of GOD must precede the day of glory, "**the house was filled with smoke.**" These words are taken up in Revelation 15:8, where it is

written concerning a scene when judgment is nearing its climax, "**The temple [i.e., in Heaven] was filled with smoke from the glory of God, and from his power.**"

Most significant is the threefold witness of Isaiah 6 to the spheres which are filled with the Lord's glory.

1. His train filled the temple.
2. The whole earth is full of His glory.
3. The house was filled with smoke.

In that temple there was room for one throne, and one only. The prophet later recorded the proud boast of one who was foremost in rebellion against GOD. "**I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God . . . I will be like the most High**" (Isaiah 14:13-14). But no creature, however great, could partake of that incommunicable majesty that pertained solely to the Godhead. Only the Lord could be enthroned in the temple; only His glory shall spread through the earth, for "**the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day**" (Isaiah 2:11). He can have no rivals. All dominion must be His. The house was filled with smoke, even as "**Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire**" (Exodus 19:18). The holiness of GOD must have its way throughout His dwelling place; nought could be exempt from its searching claims.

"**Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts**" (Isaiah 6:5). As Isaiah gazed upon the scene before him, he was stirred by that *profound sense of unworthiness* of which the godly are ever conscious when they come face to face with GOD. Isaiah considered that building filled with the majesty and holiness of his Lord. Did it not claim that his life should ever be a little sanctuary in which the Lord should have undisputed sway, and in which the Holy, holy, holy should ascend without ceasing? But how should he take such words upon his lips, seeing that he had for himself beheld the thrice-holy One? Words of confession burst from him, words that were utterly true, words in which there was no reserve of self-righteousness. "**Woe is me!**" In the preceding chapter of his book he had pronounced six woes upon the sinful; now he utters the seventh woe on himself. "**I am undone** -- cut off -- destroyed." He had neither fitness in self for such a scene of holiness, nor title to abide in such a presence.

"**I am a man of unclean lips.**" The word "**unclean**" was that which most constantly be on the lips of a leper. Isaiah had seen the horror of leprosy in the case of king Uzziah, and now he owns himself to be of like character. His very lips were polluted. How should they speak words of purity, and how should he continue in the service of the Holy One of Israel? How should he speak of the sins of others, seeing he could not speak of the holiness of GOD? Nor could he find ought else as he reflected upon the condition of his nation. All were alike in their guilt, "**a people of unclean lips.**" The lips of Miriam had been filled with murmuring, but in GOD's sight they were unclean, and He made their condition morally to be seen as leprosy physically. The lips of Gehazi had been filled with covetousness and falsehood, and the acts of Uzziah with presumption and anger, and their uncleanness had been made manifest. The prophet realized his kinship with them, and in that dread awakening poured out his confession. Are his words less applicable to us today?

That which wrought most powerfully upon him was a sight greater than that of seraphim. **"Mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."** The emphasis of the statement is upon the title -- the King, Jehovah of hosts. To the godly of Israel no name was as His and no greatness as His. All their reverence and all their longings surrounded Him. As Jeremiah said, **"But the LORD is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king"** (Jeremiah 10:10). Isaiah had seen Him with his very eyes. This was the sight which made him loathe his dross. Compared with this sight, *all earthly grandeur was as nothing*. In beholding Him, he had seen every precious thing -- holiness, wisdom, truth, and love -- these and all other traits of the divine character, in limitless display. Because he had seen Him, and had seen all loveliness radiant on His face, he could speak the words in later prophecy that have so stirred the longings of the redeemed and filled their hearts with gladness and awe: **"Thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty"** (Isaiah 33:17).

"Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (Isaiah 6:6-7). True confession brings the divine cleansing, even as we are assured by the apostle that **"if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (I John 1:9). As the burden of the seraph's cry was the holiness of GOD, so it was fitting that one of them should be employed to convey to Isaiah that which would take away his iniquity. A holy GOD must have holy prophets. **"Be ye holy; for I am holy"** is His unalterable demand.

That which touched Isaiah's lips was a coal from off the altar, a live coal, i.e., with the altar fire burning brightly in it. It had come from the brazen altar, for that -- not the incense altar -- could meet the sinner's need. The value of the live coal lay not in the fire as viewed in itself, but in the fact that it had first fed upon the sacrifice. It was the worth of the latter, as given to GOD in death, that could alone take away sin. Applied to Isaiah's lips, it dealt with their iniquity, for it was anticipative of the one sacrifice of infinite and eternal worth, even that of the Lord JESUS CHRIST at Calvary. In that sacrifice, the holiness of GOD would be fully vindicated and fully satisfied, so that no stain of sin would remain upon those whose cleansing it would effect.

The CHRIST of the throne is the CHRIST of the Cross. The Sovereign of the universe is the Sacrifice for sins. When Isaiah beheld His glory, more than seven hundred years were to pass before He should leave the throne for the lowliness of the manger, the loneliness of Judea's hills, the sorrow of Gethsemane, and the unforsakenness of Golgotha, but even in the unfathomable woes of His sin-bearing, He was the same Person as when He reigned amid the seraphim. Therefore in the live coal it is His preciousness that is set before us and the exceeding anguish of His suffering in the fire of judgment for our sakes.

III. THE BLESSING -- THE KING'S COMMISSION

"Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go, and tell this people . . ." (Isaiah 6:8-9). Hitherto only the voices of the seraphim and of the prophet had been heard, but the Lord Himself then spoke. He sought one whom He might send; this was divine Sovereignty. He sought one

who would do in willing obedience; this was human responsibility. These, the two indispensable factors in every true call to the service of the Lord, met in the commission of Isaiah. Sovereign choice of the servant was seen in the Lord's mercy that granted him the vision that wrought so wonderfully in him. Exercise of the servant's heart was seen in his humility with which he bowed to the revelation of the divine holiness and owned his uncleanness. Thus prepared by the Lord's mercy for the Lord's call, he accepted without question and without reservation the voice of the Lord to his heart. Then the word was spoken that sent him forth, the word of *irrevocable privilege* that gave him to be the bearer of the Lord's message to the nation.

The fruitfulness of Isaiah's ministry is beyond our estimation. What is wrought in his own day and what it has meant through the centuries will be revealed by and by. We, who are so greatly indebted to it, must take to heart the lessons of his life and seek the light of the Master's presence, that, seeing "**the King, the LORD of hosts,**" we, too, may pass by way of confession and cleansing to such commission as He may deign to give. And if the commission has long been ours, we may lay hold afresh upon its unfolding of the will of GOD and seek in holiness of life to fulfill His desire. As prayed McChesney, so let us pray, "Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made."

~ end of chapter 6 ~