

Isaiah's Call and Ministry

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 2:1–5

Background Scripture: Isaiah 6:1–13; 7:1–7; 20:1–6; 38:1–22

Isaiah 6:1–8

1 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.

2 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.

3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: The whole earth is full of his glory.

4 And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

5 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.

6 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:

7 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.

8 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.

Isaiah 38:1–5

1 In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.

2 Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord,

3 And said, Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.

4 Then came the word of the Lord to Isaiah, saying,

5 Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years.

Key Text

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.—Isaiah 6:8

Judah, from Isaiah to the Exile

Unit 1: Isaiah and the Renewal of the Temple

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize what Isaiah saw and his reaction to it.
2. Compare and contrast Isaiah's reaction to God's call with that of Jeremiah in reaction to his own call (lesson 5).
3. Express how to distinguish an authentic call of God from a mere felt need.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. It's Your Call (and His)
- B. Lesson Context

I. Commissioned by God (Isaiah 6:1–8)

- A. What Isaiah Saw (vv. 1–2)
- B. What Isaiah Heard (v. 3)
- C. What Isaiah Sensed (v. 4)
- D. What Isaiah Said (v. 5)

Majesty Approached

- E. What Isaiah Received (vv. 6–8)

Discerning God's Call

II. Communication with a King (Isaiah 38:1–5)

- A. Message of Death (v. 1)
- B. Tears of Bitterness (vv. 2–3)
- C. Extension of Life (vv. 4–5)

Conclusion

- A. Here Am I. Send Me!
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Amoz	<i>Ay-mahz.</i>
Habakkuk	<i>Huh-back-kuk.</i>
Hezekiah	<i>Hez-ih-kye-uh.</i>
theophany	<i>the-ah-fuh-nee.</i>
seraphims	<i>sair-uh-fimz.</i>
Uzziah	<i>Uh-zye-uh.</i>

Introduction

A. It's Your Call (and His)

At age 11, I first sensed God calling me to vocational ministry. During a revival meeting, an evangelist approached me and said, “Young man, I’m setting you aside for the ministry.” At that time, the encounter did not impact me, but I reconsidered the evangelist’s words years later.

Throughout my teenage years, I continued to sense that call to ministry. Trusted friends repeatedly encouraged me. People in my congregation confirmed the call and encouraged me to begin training for ministry. Backed by the encouragement and confirmation from my congregation, I enrolled in a Bible college to follow the Lord’s call.

There seem to be two types of calls from God. The first type is what we might designate as a “general” call. These are the thoughts, actions, and attitudes that God expects of every believer. The expectations of this call are found in the pages of Scripture.

The second type is what we might designate as a “specific” call: a sensed call of God to a particular or specialized ministry. There is disagreement regarding whether every believer receives this kind of call. Today’s lesson examines the details of a call unmistakably from God.

B. Lesson Context

Isaiah began his prophetic ministry about 200 years after the nation of Israel divided. In 931 BC, the united monarchy of Israel split into two parts: Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom). Isaiah’s ministry focused on the southern kingdom of Judah, as reflected by the Judean kings listed in Isaiah 1:1.

Surprisingly, the Lord’s call on Isaiah doesn’t occur until Isaiah 6. This is at variance from the usual pattern of recording a prophet’s call at or very near a book’s beginning (examples: Jeremiah 1:4–19; Ezekiel 1:1–3:15). Perhaps the writer wanted to establish the context of the call, which the first five chapters of Isaiah accomplish.

The people of Judah had become a “sinful nation,” being openly rebellious against the Lord (Isaiah 1:1–5). A sense of self-sufficiency accompanied a facade of economic prosperity, military security, and religious arrogance (2:7–8). The Lord depicts His people as a vineyard that produced unacceptable fruit (5:1–7). In their doing of injustice, they had redefined the terms *good* and *evil* (5:20).

Such was the era that Isaiah found himself in when his call came about.

I. Commissioned by God

(Isaiah 6:1–8)

A. What Isaiah Saw (vv. 1–2)

1a. In the year that king Uzziah died.

Uzziah (also known as “Azariah” in 2 Kings 15:1–7) reigned as *king* of Judah for 52 years (2 Chronicles 26:3). We don’t know the exact years of his reign, but one estimate gives the range of 792–740 BC.

For much of his reign, Uzziah did “right in the sight of the Lord” and, as a result, God allowed him to experience blessing (2 Chronicles 26:4–5). However, pride led to his downfall when he entered the temple to burn incense (26:16–21).

1b. I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

At least two possibilities exist regarding the setting of *the temple*. One possibility is that the setting is the earthly temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. Another option is that Isaiah sees the heavenly temple. Given the actions of Uzziah in the Jerusalem temple (see above), some commentators suggest this setting allows Isaiah to realize that the presence of the Lord has not departed from the temple (contrast Ezekiel 11:22–23). Still, others suggest that the vision’s grandeur indicates the heavenly temple (compare Revelation 11:19). Regardless, the significance is that Isaiah sees the location where the enthroned Lord rules.

That Isaiah *saw ... the Lord* is echoed in John 12:41. This fact does not contradict Exodus 33:20 or John 1:18. What Isaiah sees is called a *theophany*, which is a manifestation of God, not God in His actual essence (compare Genesis 28:13–15; Exodus 24:9–11; 1 Kings 22:19).

The Lord’s position *sitting upon a throne* reveals Him as the living heavenly King. Although the earthly King Uzziah has died, the Lord still reigns! The throne’s elevated location, *high and lifted up*, reflects the exalted nature of His being (compare Isaiah 57:15; Revelation 4:2).

The expansive nature of the *train* of His garment is echoed in Revelation 1:13. Special garments marked the identity of significant figures, like priests or kings (compare Exodus 28:33–34; 39:24–26, where the word is translated “hem”). However, the garment Isaiah sees is unlike any garment worn by a human. The size of this garment *filled the temple*, leaving Isaiah incapable of giving further description.

2. 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.

The word *seraphims* is a transliteration (not a translation) of a Hebrew word. That’s where a word in one language is brought over into another language simply by swapping the letters of the word in the original language into the letters that sound the same in the receptor language.

The transliteration of this word occurs only here and in Isaiah 6:6, below. This Hebrew word elsewhere refers to serpents (Numbers 21:6, 8; Deuteronomy 8:15; Isaiah 14:29; 30:6). The root of this word may come from a Hebrew word meaning “fiery” or “burning.” One possibility is that the seraphims appear as flaming, winged creatures.

What Do You Think?

What does the covering of the seraphim reveal to us about postures of worship and prayer?

Digging Deeper

How do physical, mental, and emotional postures affect your acts of worship?

B. What Isaiah Heard (v. 3)

3a. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts.

The proclamation of the seraphim *Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts* is similar to that of the four “beasts” in Revelation 4:8. The repetition of the word *holy* stresses its significance: the Lord’s holiness is unparalleled!

The Hebrew adjective translated “holy” appears in 34 verses in Isaiah; clearly, it’s a vital concept to the writer, implying “separation” or “distinctiveness.” The Lord’s holiness means that He is separate from His creation in that He is morally perfect (Deuteronomy 32:4; 1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 18:30; Habakkuk 1:12–13; etc.).

The designation *Lord of hosts* or “Lord God of hosts” appears 274 times in the Old Testament, with about 75 percent of those occurring in the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. As the timeline of history advances, God’s power is increasingly stressed since the title reflects the Lord’s power as king and commander of the heavenly armies (see 1 Samuel 4:4; Psalm 24:10; Isaiah 1:24; etc.).

3b. The whole earth is full of his glory.

No human-made structure can confine the glory of God (1 Kings 8:27). Since *the whole earth* belongs to God as its creator, it cannot but help to reflect His *glory* (Numbers 14:21; Psalm 72:19).

What Do You Think?

How do you describe the relationship between God’s holiness and the holiness of His people (1 Peter 1:15–16)?

Digging Deeper

How can you help others worship God for His holiness?

C. What Isaiah Sensed (v. 4)

4. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

The seraph's *voice* has an impressive impact, causing *the posts of the door* to move. Although the text does not indicate the location of this door, it is likely at the entrance of the envisioned temple (see Isaiah 6:1b, above).

The presence of *smoke* in Scripture is sometimes associated with the presence of God (example: Exodus 19:18). That presence can be in a negative sense of divine judgment (example: Isaiah 9:18–19). Or it can be in a positive sense of divine guidance or care (example: Isaiah 4:5). Smoke also serves to conceal the viewer from seeing aspects of the divine directly, thus preventing death (Leviticus 16:13). The smoke in the context of the verse at hand brings to mind the cloud that “filled the house of the Lord” in Solomon’s time (1 Kings 8:10).

D. What Isaiah Said (v. 5)

5. 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 pronounces *woe* more than 20 times in his book. All but two of those are voiced against those who conduct themselves in ways that oppose God. In the remaining two uses, the prophet pronounces “woe” against himself (here and in Isaiah 24:16).

The expression *Woe is me!* reveals Isaiah’s feeling of unworthiness to experience the sights and sounds before him. He knows his unholiness prevents him from being in the presence of a holy God, *the Lord of hosts*, even in a vision. The prophet confesses that his sin makes him unclean. He also admits to living among *a people of unclean lips*, but this admission is not to shift the blame to excuse his own sinful condition. In acknowledging his own unholiness, he is taking personal responsibility for it.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can our corporate worship include times of confession?

Digging Deeper

What biblical examples of corporate confession can you name?

Majesty Approached

My first visit to Colorado was not what I expected. I was attending a conference near the base of Pikes Peak, one of the tallest mountains in the state. I looked forward to a few days of crisp air, blazing sunshine, and exhilarating mountain views.

When my friend and I arrived, a dense fog hung over the landscape like a blanket. We arrived at our hotel and parked our rental car without catching a glimpse of Pikes Peak. But the following morning, the sky was clear, and the sun was dazzling. As we drove toward the conference center, Pikes Peak dominated our view. Of course, the mountain had been there the night before, but the fog had concealed it. What the fog had concealed was now revealed!

The sight of a towering mountain has a way of humbling me, reminding me of the majesty of its Creator. Isaiah felt unworthy to view the majesty of the holy and enthroned Lord. How do you combine that same realization with Hebrews 4:16 in approaching His throne in prayer?

—N. H.

E. What Isaiah Received (vv. 6–8)

6. 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.

In response to Isaiah's admission in the previous verse, *one of the seraphims* goes into action on the man's behalf. *The altar* from which the seraph takes *a live coal* refers possibly to the altar in the temple Solomon built (1 Kings 9:25). But an altar in a temple of the heavenly environs cannot be ruled out because an altar is present there as well (Revelation 6:9; 14:18; 16:7). Isaiah undoubtedly watches with great apprehension as the scene unfolds. Having just confessed his own sinful unworthiness, is he about to be punished?

7. 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.

We can only imagine the emotions that surge through Isaiah as he witnesses the seraph approaching with a burning coal. Three of Isaiah's five senses have informed his experience thus far. By sight he has beheld the Lord (Isaiah 6:1); by hearing he has perceived the declaration of the seraphims (6:3); by sight and (assumed) smell he is aware of smoke (6:4). Now the fourth sense, touch, comes into play. We do not know if Isaiah feels any sting or pain from the red-hot coal that touches his lips. If so, it must be temporary, as the words *thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged* speak not of judgment but of forgiveness.

At least four Hebrew words can be translated “(burning) coal,” so we should be rigorous in allowing context to determine meaning and significance. The act of touching this coal to Isaiah’s *mouth* symbolizes his purification from *sin*. We also notice that although Isaiah’s unholiness is corrected through the cleansing action taken by one of the seraphim, the prophet’s own confession of unholiness comes first.

8a. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?

First, the seraphim spoke (Isaiah 6:3, above). Then Isaiah spoke (6:5). Then one seraph spoke (6:7). Now, *the Lord* Himself speaks by asking two questions. The first question deals with “sender action,” and the second deals with “servant action.” These are important questions because the Lord expects those who trust in Him to be His hands and feet at times (Romans 10:15). Sadly, that does not always happen (example: Ezekiel 22:30).

The first-person plural pronoun *us* is similar to the language used in account of creation and in response to the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 1:26; 11:7). The plural pronoun may refer to the Lord and the seraphim who make up His heavenly counsel (compare 1 Kings 22:19). Other commentators suggest that the plural pronoun may refer to the three persons of the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah, however, is probably not mulling over such matters at this point; all he hears is the call for someone to *go* on the Lord’s behalf. And he wastes no time in responding.

Discerning God’s Call

Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth-century preacher, had no formal theological education. Yet he preached to thousands every Sunday for more than 40 years!

How did God call him to such a task? Once, when describing his call to ministry, Spurgeon said it was “an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work.” Those who like neat logical categories may be unsatisfied with that description. They may desire to have the idea of God’s calls examined in specific terms of form, content, etc.

Perhaps we may discern a more practical approach in the New Testament, where God’s calls seem to come about as character and spiritual giftedness are observed. The first-century church chose “seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” to serve in a specific capacity (Acts 6:3–5). Can we not conclude that they answered God’s call to do so? Barnabas seems initially to have simply grown into his leadership role, having been recognized by others as a “son of consolation” who led by example and

spoke up on behalf of others (4:36–37; 9:27). These traits were evident before he was set apart for missionary travels by a specific directive of the Holy Spirit (13:2).

Martin Luther was on target when he described his call as “God’s voice heard by faith.” When our aptitudes, spiritual gifts, circumstances, and opportunities come together, let us make sure we are not overlooking God’s call.

—C. R. B.

8b. Then said I, Here am I; send me.

Isaiah’s once unclean lips are ready to serve on the Lord’s behalf. He is willing to go wherever the Lord would *send* him. His willingness to be sent contrasts with the hesitancy of prophets such as Moses (Exodus 3:11) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6).

What Do You Think?

What prevents believers from saying, “Here am I. Send me!” to God?

Digging Deeper

What steps can believers take to remove these barriers?

II. Communication with a King

(Isaiah 38:1–5)

The events of Isaiah 38:1–5 occur sometime before the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyrian invasion, described in Isaiah 36–37. This is based on Isaiah 38:6, which describes the rescue as a future promise. By this time, Isaiah’s lengthy prophetic ministry was several decades old. The parallel accounts to Isaiah 38:1–6 are found in 2 Kings 20:1–6 and 2 Chronicles 32:24–26.

A. Message of Death (v. 1)

1a. In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death.

Hezekiah reigned as king of Judah from 715 to 686 BC. The king’s diagnosis is untold. Part of his suffering includes a skin ailment, causing Isaiah to direct him to use “a lump of figs” as “a plaister upon the boil” (Isaiah 38:21).

1b. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.

We do not know whether the ailing king sent for *Isaiah the prophet* or whether the Lord directed Isaiah to appear before the king. Either way, Isaiah's earlier proclamation, "Here I am; send me" (Isaiah 6:8b, above), is consistent with his role as God's messenger.

The descriptor of the prophet being the *son of Amoz* appears thirteen times in the Old Testament, seven of which appear in the book of Isaiah (here and in Isaiah 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; 20:2; 37:2, 21). Scripture gives no other details regarding Isaiah's father.

The message Isaiah brings is not of his own but from *the Lord*. Two phrases repeat the same mortal warning: Hezekiah *shalt die* and *not live*. Isaiah gives no promise of healing. Instead, he directs the king to *set his affairs in order*.

What Do You Think?

How would you support someone who has received news of a terminal diagnosis?

Digging Deeper

In such a case, how do you discern whether or not to show your support by speaking up or remaining silent?

B. Tears of Bitterness (vv. 2–3)

2. Then Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord.

The prophet's somber message devastates *Hezekiah*. Perhaps the king is lying on his bed when he receives Isaiah's word. Turning *his face toward the wall* may be an attempt to hide his reaction from others present or to focus on his prayer—or both.

3. And said, Remember now, O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.

Hezekiah has reason to claim that he had *done that which is good*. As king of Judah, he has renovated the temple, overseen its purification, and restored worship practices there (2 Chronicles 29). He has removed artifacts of pagan worship throughout Judah (2 Kings 18:4). The phrase *wept sore* is a two-word summary of the anguish he expresses in Isaiah 38:9–14.

C. Extension of Life (vv. 4–5)

4. Then came the word of the Lord to Isaiah, saying.

The parallel account in 2 Kings 20:4 adds more detail. It describes how Isaiah departs after giving the message but has not gone far when *the Lord* directs him to give another *word* to the king.

5a. Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father.

The declaration *thus saith the Lord* indicates that the prophet's message is not his own. Instead, Isaiah brings it from the Lord (compare Exodus 4:22; 2 Samuel 7:5; Jeremiah 2:2). The appeal to *David thy father* highlights Hezekiah's position as David's descendant (1 Chronicles 3:10–13).

5b. I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years.

This message announces a reversal. The biblical record reveals that, at first, Hezekiah became prideful (2 Chronicles 32:24–25). But subsequent repentance paved the way for notable accomplishments (32:26–33).

Conclusion

A. Here Am I. Send Me!

Not everyone will experience the same call to vocational ministry as I described at the outset. However, God calls everyone to serve Him. Regardless of where God calls us to serve, we should answer with our version of “Here am I; send me!”

When we respond humbly and willingly, God will use us to represent Him to others. Some of us may serve God through vocational ministry. Others will serve Him via their witness through their “9-to-5” jobs, relationships with family and friends, financial support of mission work, etc. When we follow God's call, regardless of where it takes us, we are in a place of service to Him.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us be attentive to how You have called us to go into the world and represent You. Give us the courage to speak of You to a world that desperately needs to know You and Your message of salvation. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Respond to God's call!