



"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME"
ISAIAH 61:1

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THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

CHAPTER 6

AND HIS NAME
WILL BE CALLED
WONDERFUL COUNSELOR,
MIGHTY GOD,
EVERLASTING FATHER,
PRINCE OF
PEACE.
ISAIAH 9:6

Isaiah is called "The Book of Salvation." The name *Isaiah* means "the salvation of the Lord" or "the Lord is salvation." Isaiah is the first book containing the writings of the prophets of the Bible. And the author, Isaiah, who is called the Prince of Prophets, shines above all the other writers and prophets of Scripture. His mastery of the language, his rich and vast vocabulary, and his poetic skill have earned him the title, "Shakespeare of the Bible." He was educated, distinguished, and privileged, yet remained a deeply spiritual man. He was committed to obedience over the long haul of his 55-60 year ministry as a prophet of God. He was a true patriot who loved his country and his people. Strong tradition suggests that he died a martyr's death under the reign of King Manasseh by being placed within the hollow of a tree trunk and sawed in two.

Isaiah's calling as a prophet was primarily to the nation of Judah (the southern kingdom) and to Jerusalem, urging the people to repent from their sins and return to God. He also foretold the coming of the Messiah and the salvation of the Lord. Many of his prophecies predicted events that occurred in Isaiah's near future, yet at the same time they foretold the events of the distant future (such as the coming of the Messiah), and even some events still to come in the last days (such as the second coming of Christ).

In summary, the message of Isaiah is that salvation comes from God—not man. God alone is Savior, Ruler and King.

Commentary on the book of Isaiah is by noted theologian Rev. William G. Most (1914-1999). His contributions to theology have been recognized all over the world. He published 12 books and a host of articles on topics ranging from biblical studies to Mariology and Latin grammar.

Book of Isaiah

Summary of Chapter 6

In the year in which King Uzziah died Isaiah saw a wonderful vision that inaugurated his mission as a prophet. He saw the Lord on a throne, the train of the Lord's robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphs, each having six wings. Two of these wings covered their faces, two covered their feet, and with the other two they were flying. They called to each other: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.

Then the doorposts and thresholds shook, and smoke filled the temple.

Isaiah, recognizing what the vision was, said: Woe to me! I am a man with unclean lips and yet I have seen the Almighty Lord!

and hearing they might hear and not understand." These words are from Isaiah 6:9-10, which we saw above. They have been much discussed of course. St. Mark quotes them in the form found in the Targum. St. Matthew quotes Isaiah in softer form (13:13-15): "Therefore do I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear." Isaiah had used imperative forms: "Hearing hear, but do not understand, seeing see, but do not perceive. . . ."

First, as we said, it is well known that the Hebrews often attributed to positive direct action of God what He only permits, He did not really want to blind people. For in Mt 23:37 He wept over Jerusalem because they would not listen.

So we need a different way to understand the purpose of parables. It is this: We might think of two spirals in the reactions of people to parables - and other things too. Let us imagine a man who has never been drunk before, but tonight he gets very drunk. The next day there will be guilt feelings - we specified it was the first time. Over time, something must give: either he will align his actions with his beliefs, or his beliefs will be pulled to match his actions. In other words, if he continues to get drunk, he will lose the ability to see there is anything wrong with getting drunk. But other beliefs are interconnected, and so his ability to see spiritual things becomes more and more dull.

In the other direction, if one lives vigorously in accord with faith, which tells us the things of this world are hardly worth a mention compared to the things of eternity (cf. Phil 3:7-8), such a one grows gradually more and more in understanding of spiritual things; he is on the good spiral. So the parables are a magnificent device of our Father, showing both mercy and justice simultaneously. To one who goes on the bad spiral, the blindness is due in justice, yet it is also mercy, for the more one realizes, the greater his responsibility. On the good spiral, the growing light is in a sense justice for good living; yet more basically it is mercy, for no creature by its own power can establish a claim on God. So in both directions, mercy and justice are identified, even as they are in the divine essence, where all attributes are identified with each other.

Rather similarly, Pius XII said (*Divino afflante Spiritu*):EB 563) that God deliberately sprinkled Scripture with difficulties to cause us to work harder and so get more out of them.

So we can understand God's words to Isaiah in this way.

But then God foretold the exile, yet said that a holy remnant, a holy seed, would be left, which would be a "stump in the land". We think of course of the great prophecy in Isaiah 11:1 which says that there will be a shoot from the stump of David, that is, after David's line had been deprived of its power, and seemed dead, a great ruler, the Messiah, would come. (More on Isaiah 11 later, of course).

End of Chapter 6

Then one of the seraphs flew to him. He had a live coal which he had taken from the altar with tongs. The seraph touched Isaiah's mouth saying: This has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for.

Then the Lord said: Whom shall I send? Who will go? Isaiah replied: Here I am. Send me!

The Lord replied: Go and tell this people: Really listen, but do not understand. Really look, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people calloused. Make their ears dull. Close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears and their heart might understand and turn and be healed.

This hardening is to last until their cities are ruined and deserted, and their houses empty, their fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away, and the land is deserted. And even though a tenth remains, it will be laid waste again. But just as the terebinth (a small Mediterranean tree) and the oak leave behind stumps after being cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.

Comments on Chapter 6

This was the vision in which Isaiah received his commission as a prophet. It is strange indeed that the account of it is put here in chapter 6, instead of at the beginning. But the sayings of prophets were often given at different times, and later arranged.

Isaiah says it happened in the year in which king Uzziah died. The date of his death is disputed, estimates range from 747 to 735. We commented on the circumstances of his death in the introduction.

The vision Isaiah saw was of course anthropomorphic. God does not have human form. But the whole scene powerfully impressed Isaiah with the transcendence of God. That word means the fact that He is above and beyond all our categories. To illustrate: When we know something we know either passively or actively. In the passive mode, we take in an image from something outside, we are passive, we gain information. Now God cannot be passive, cannot gain anything. So the passive mode is not correct for Him. But in the active mode a person knows what is happening only if and because he is causing it, like a blind man pushing a chair. Obviously we cannot make God so limited. so we must simply say: He is above and beyond all our categories. (Some unfortunate theologians commonly called "Thomists" have insisted God knows only by causing thing. But St. Thomas himself never said that. Rather, every time- and it was several times -- when he wanted to explain how God can know future contingents (e. g., what I will do tomorrow at 10 A. M) Thomas first explains carefully that although a future free act as future is unknowable

even to God, yet since God is in eternity, which has no past, and no future, the thing is present to Him. And so He knows it. But Thomas always stops there. He never tries to explain just <how> God knows a thing once it is present to His eternity. That is part of the mystery of His transcendence.

This transcendence of God is something we greatly need to realize, or try to realize. For there are two poles, i. e., centers about which things cluster, in our relationship to God. One is the pole of love, closeness, warmth. The other is the sense of His infinite majesty, greatness. It is this that Isaiah saw so well by means of this anthropomorphic (thought of having human form) vision. The Saints and Fathers of the Church have understood this aspect especially well. Thus Dionysius the Areopagite, writing around the year 500. A. D. said that God is best known by "unknowing." St. Gregory of Nyssa in his <Life of Moses> said: "The true vision of the One we seek. . . consists in this: in not seeing. For the one sought is beyond all knowledge." St. Augustine, (<On Christian Doctrine>), 1. 6. 6 said: "He must not even be called inexpressible, for when we say that word, we say something."

There is just a trifle of exaggeration in such sayings as that of Augustine. Yet there is far more truth in them. Similarly the philosopher Plotinus said, (<Enneads>) 6. 8. 9 that God is "beyond being." Plato seems to have said much the same in <Republic> 6. 509B.

The explanation of such sayings is this: If we compare any word, e. g., good or being, as used to apply to God, and as used to apply to any creature, we find that the sense is, in the two cases, partly the same, but mostly different. Hence God is inexpressible, as Augustine said.

Isaiah had a deep sense of this reality. To lack it means that one's devotion will be sick, mired in the slush of a distortion of love.

As part of this vision Isaiah sees some seraphim, which he describes as bright creatures with six wings each. That word seraph, plural seraphim, is indeed rare, being found only in this passage. Basically the same Hebrew word appears in Numbers 21:6 where God sends burning serpents - such seems to be the meaning of <sarap>, to punish the faithless Jews. Moses prayed, and God directed Moses to make a bronze serpent, and put it upon a pole. Anyone bitten would recover if he looked at the bronze serpent. This was very obviously a forecast in action, a prefiguration, of Christ on the cross.

Sometimes people speak of nine choirs of angels, and seem to have found them in St. Paul's Colossians and Ephesians. But that is a mistake, for St. Paul especially in Colossians, is using such terms, which he took from his opponents, in countering their errors. The opponents were most likely either Gnostics or Jewish apocalyptic speculators. In St. Paul's context, they are evil spirits, not angels.

The seraphim were calling out Holy, holy, holy. The holiness of God is a most prominent theme in Isaiah. Basically holiness means God's concern for what is morally right - cf. the appendix to Wm. Most, Commentary on St. Paul. We can see the thought well in Isaiah 5:15-16: "Man is bowed down, and men are brought low. But the Lord of hosts will be exalted in right judgment [<mishpat>], and God, the Holy One, will show Himself holy [<niqdesh>] from the root of <qadosh>, holy] by moral rightness [i. e., by doing what moral rightness calls for]." Similarly in Ezek 28:22: "They will know I am the Lord when I inflict punishment on her [Sidon] and I will show myself holy in her [<niqdashti>]."

This shaking of the doorposts would recall the earthquake at the time of King Uzziah.

Isaiah thought he was doomed, because he knew no man could see God and live. We think of Moses who wanted to see God, but was refused, as we saw in the introduction. He said his lips were impure from sin. But one of the seraphim, in a symbolic action, took a coal from the altar and touched his lips to purify them.

In John (12:41), we read, remarkably, that it was Jesus Isaiah had seen. that saying came right after a quotation of the next mysterious lines of Isaiah, which we are about to consider.

Those next lines are indeed mysterious. God asks for someone to volunteer to be sent, and Isaiah volunteers. Then God gives him a strange commission, which seems to mean he is to blind the people so they could not be forgiven.

To understand, we must know that the Hebrews commonly spoke of God as positively doing things He only permits. Thus in 1 Samuel 4:3 - if we read the Hebrew, and not the slanted translations - the Jews said after a defeat by the Philistines: "Why did God strike us today before the face of the Philistines?" They knew perfectly well it was the Philistines who had struck them. Similarly, in the account of the plagues in Exodus, several times God says He will harden Pharaoh, and again the text says God did harden the heart of Pharaoh. Again, God merely permitted it. Cf. Is 45:7, where God says: "I bring well-being and create woe." And in Amos 3:6 He said: "When evil comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?"

The mysterious words God spoke to Isaiah are quoted in all three synoptics, in connection with the parables. If we follow the chronology of Mark's Gospel-- for the Gospels are not intent on chronology - Mark indicates Jesus at first spoke clearly, but then, after His enemies charged He was casting out devils by the devil, He turned to parables. Jesus told His disciples that to them was given to know the mysteries of the kingdom, but to others, all was in parables, "so that seeing they might look and not see,