

CALLED TO SERVE

There was the sunshine of God's grace and it was preached by Isaiah as no other prophet preached it
by Stuart Olyott

At the annual Evangelical Movement of Wales Conference in Aberystwyth in August 2002 this opening message on "Called to Serve" was given by Professor Stuart Olyott of the Evangelical Theological College of Wales, Bryntirion, Bridgend, to 1400 people in the Great Hall.

In Isaiah 6 the call of that prophet is described.

1] THE NEARNESS OF GOD (v.1)

What occurred in the life of Isaiah has happened many times before. Once there was a young man running away from home, keeping the sun behind him so that he would know the way to his uncle's house. Then night came and he had to sleep in the wilderness. Jacob put a rock under his head for a pillow. But he still slept and dreamed of a staircase with other presences and creatures going up and down from where he was lying. His eyes ran up the ladder and he sees God. When he woke up, God was in the wilderness and he did not know it. How awesome was that place. It was the house of God. It is always like that. The veil is drawn back and then we are conscious of God's nearness.

Moses was 80 years old having had 40 years of education and 40 more as a shepherd. In Horeb he sees a bush burning but not consumed. When he investigates he hears a voice saying, "Don't come any nearer for the place you are standing is holy ground", and in that ordinary place he meets with Jehovah and is afraid to look at the living God.

By 724 BC the leprous king Uzziah of Judah had not been seen for a while and finally in that year he died, and Isaiah goes into the temple. It is usually noisy with people - sacrificers, priests and levites coming on and off duty. This time it is very different because Isaiah sees there the Lord high and lifted up and the train of his robe filling the temple.

Do you have a problem with Jacob, Moses and Isaiah seeing God? The apostle John says no man has at any time seen God, yet there are these three cases. The answer is that John is talking about God in his 'Godness', God the Father in particular, but the Son reveals him. Whom did Jacob, Moses and Isaiah see? John tells us in chapter 12 that Isaiah saw Christ.

There is no escape from the presence of this God. When you were born you were immediately in the presence of God, and in school too that is where you always were, in his presence, and where you live, or spend your Saturday evenings one thing is certain, that it will always be in the presence of the Lord.

2. THE HOLINESS OF GOD (vv.2-5)

There are glorious creatures called angels, and if one of them became visible here now what would be our reaction? In Bethlehem a shepherd saw one and God's glory. Then he and his companions were greatly afraid. An angel caused an earthquake on the first day of the week. His countenance was like lightning and the armed guards trembled and were as dead men. Then what would it be like to see a class of angels that no one has ever seen but Isaiah? He saw those whose name is 'burning ones' - seraphim. How do they behave in the presence of Christ? His glory is so beyond description that with two wings the seraphim cover their faces. Pure creatures are baffled by the glory of God. The temple shook and the hall was filled with smoke. Impurity was in the presence of holiness - what can that

mean? An overwhelming sense of filth, of ruin, so that know you are dirty, and damned. In the presence of that God you all were born, and went to school, and swore, and did unspeakable things, and treated Sunday as you treat Monday, and told that lie - all in the presence of this God. He is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - one Almighty God. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts," the seraphim cried.

3. THE GRACE OF GOD (vv. 6&7)

Grace is great kindness utterly undeserved and given freely by God. How could Isaiah respond to God when feeling his own filth and then one of these seraphim is coming towards him? How will you feel when you are at the judgment seat of Christ? There is no escape. Others are being evaluated and judged, and then it is your turn. How could Isaiah respond? But the Lord is a God of grace. There was always something happening in the temple. Sacrifice for sin was continually made. Every day the priests took a lamb and killed it and they laid it on the altar. It was a substitute to take away the sin of the offerer. Is it possible that the blood of an animal could take away man's sin? Impossible! This action was an anticipation of a great event to come. Later another of God's prophets called John could point to Jehovah Jesus and say, "Behold the Lamb of God." Every time I sin I sin against an infinite God and the only One who can deal with my sin must also be infinite. But also I am a man. He who is God also became man, and he bore my sin and the wrath of God against it. He quenched it all one Friday long ago. So here comes the seraph from the altar towards Isaiah, but the lamb has been burnt away. What can the seraph do? He takes a coal from the altar and he touches Isaiah's lips with it, and in picture form it takes away and purges his sin. God is very kind to sinners, and when a man sees that God is near and holy and that man is deeply ashamed, then God is very kind. It is those who don't care who meet the anger of God. The Lord whom Isaiah saw says, "Come to me and I will give you rest." Isaiah finds the grace of God then.

4. THE CALL OF GOD (v.8)

What has Isaiah not heard until this point? The voice of the Lord. The divided two nations of Judah and Israel were getting on with one another at that time, and in Judah people were rich, and the army was strong with no external threats from other nations. It seemed a good time to be alive. It was then that the call came to Isaiah. If you have known God's presence and holiness and you have been touched by God's grace then be prepared for the call of God to come. Today in France there are 36,000 towns and villages and 32,000 have no gospel witness. There are the huge former Soviet countries where millions live without a knowledge of God. There are Muslim nations in great darkness with their populations living and dying, most people never meeting a single Christian. But in our own country is barrenness. How many places are without an evangelical witness of integrity? Wouldn't it be right to go to some of these places? Is it right that many companies of God's people have no one to pastor them month after month? Or what of the place where you work? Is it right that no one is taking the gospel there? God looks at our own contemporary world and says, "Whom shall I send?" Is there no one present here who will say, "Here am I, frail and very temporary, send me." Isn't there someone else who will say with Isaiah, "Here am I." Be careful. Don't say, "Here I am," unless you are prepared to hear the other part - "Go!" Why are so few presenting themselves today? Where are those who will say, "Here am I, send me." God is gracious and he is calling us to do his will.

5. THE WAYS OF GOD. (vv. 9-13).

I will read it all for it is very mysterious: "He said, 'Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'" Then I said, 'For how long O Lord?' And he

answered, 'Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitation, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged. Until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.'

What did that mean in 740 BC? Isaiah went to this pleasure-loving nation and he preached into their indifference and apathy, and little changed. But 20 years later he is still preaching on the themes of the end of the world and the conversion of the Gentiles, and 30 years later he is doing the same, and 40 years too, and even 54 years later Isaiah is still at it. There was the sunshine of God's grace and it was preached by Isaiah as no other prophet preached it. He preaches the Virgin-born Christ and the sacrificed servant - he proclaims the Messiah to them, but they go more strongly into rejection of his message.

Isaiah, hearing that commission, simply asks how long? "Until my great judgment falls," God tells him, when Babylon came in and took them into exile, and then later when Rome came in, and later again in AD 70, and then when the final judgment comes.

How easy to preach when there are huge crowds. But the one lesson every preacher must learn is that God is with you, and that is all you have to know. How will you survive as a preacher in tough judgment times? Noah preached longer than Isaiah, but only eight people entered the ark.

How strange are God's ways. The inner circle of the apostles saw so much - and James was one of them, but soon he was killed by Herod, after all that Christ invested in James. So it was with Jim Elliott and with Robert Thomas martyred before they began to reach people with the gospel. James Haldane went to Morocco and after years he became a scholar of the Koran and of Arabic languages and dialects. For 39 years he visited a thousand villages and evangelised them thoroughly, and when he got back to the UK how many converts did he know as the fruit of his ministry? Not one. What a godly man he was who had seen the massiveness of the gospel. Isaiah humbly asks, "Lord how long?" Until there is "the holy seed which will be a stump in the land".

God tonight is not willing that any of you should perish but that all of you come to a knowledge of this Lord whom Isaiah saw.

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