Isaiah’s Gospel Vision

**Isaiah 6:1–7** 1 In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out 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 trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

It seems that in modern times Americans are more biblically illiterate than ever before. That is not to say that people in the culture have not heard of Jesus and Christianity, most have, that also does not mean that people in the church have not heard of the gospel, most have. But as it pertains to understanding the gospel, having a true grasp of the gospel and being able to accurately and biblically articulate the gospel themselves; it seems that many in the Church today would still struggle to do just that. But as Isaiah himself came to find out, there is simply nothing more important than precisely how sinful man can be put right with a holy God. This great need remains true for us, and for all of humanity today.

As we approach this text, there seems to be something apocalyptic and eschatological about the temple shaking phenomenon of the “Seraphim” who call out to one another, “while the temple was filling with smoke” (6.4). It’s as if the seraphim call out right at the critical moment of the temple reaching its most significant typological function where the smoke completes the temple as it is and as it will be, that is, permeated by the Glory-Spirit of God. This would add to Isaiah’s sense of urgency. As the temple vision progresses so does the anticipation of God’s wrath. What is developing in terms of God’s holiness is fulfilled by Isaiah’s sin; namely that the King of heaven is just and because of His holy and just ways, Isaiah finds himself in an impossible crisis, *the crisis of catharsis* or personal cleansing.

*The Cleansing Of A Sinful Prophet*

Having given us some of the features of the vision of the heavenly temple and the King of glory who is enthroned there; the vision now moves toward the *purpose* in the cleansing and mission of the prophet. This great vision was not simply to qualify Isaiah as a prophet who heard from God, but to justify Isaiah as a sinner before God the great Judge-King of heaven who will by no means clear the guilty. Isaiah, like those to whom he would prophecy, needed to understand the righteousness of God in order to understand the nation’s sin and the mercy and grace that is available to them through the good news which he would repeatedly preach to them. The vision was intended to convey the notion of God’s justice, man’s sin and God’s gracious provision from the altar. Therefore, the cleansing of the prophet is paradigmatic for true salvation, true saving grace and the nature of the gospel itself. But in order to truly understand the good of the gospel, Isaiah must be convinced of the bad news of human depravity. That is why the gospel if it is to be rightly understood must begin with sin and misery before we can appreciate the mercy and grace of the gospel.

*The Sin And Misery Of Profane Sinners*

It has to be put that way because we are losing our grip on biblical terminology. We want human beings, we want people, we want men and women, we want victims, addicts, and patients but we no longer want sinners. And the more therapeutic our gospel looks, the less power it has to safe! The more we allow for people to define their greatest needs along psychological and emotional or therapeutic lines, the more we will have to reinvent the gospel so that it will remain palatable for the postmodern man. Above all however, Isaiah comes into the awareness of his sin the more he becomes aware of the holiness and righteousness of God. Thus, for Isaiah the issue was a matter of compatibility. He was not compatible with holiness of heaven certainly not with the holy God of heaven. With a renewed perspective, Isaiah could now look towards the temple and understand what Solomon meant when he prayed:

**1 Kings 8:30** 30 “Listen to the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear in heaven Your dwelling place; hear and forgive.

In one sense we could say that what Isaiah saw was the Gospel of saving grace as the very thing that the people really needed. More than national morality, national peace, national security, unity, and prosperity; Judah needs national salvation! That was something that in no way they could produce by their own power!

But Isaiah saw that his iniquity and the iniquity of the people was real, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips” (v.5). Up to this point, the righteousness of God could only call down ruin upon him. With this confession, Isaiah is declaring several things. The “woe” emphasizes not only the terror of the prophet here but also the certainty of judgement. It is a “woe” because something is certain to befall him. His focus on his unclean “lips” makes Isaiah unfit in every way. Because He has “unclean lips” he is not able to make an appeal before God. He is not able join with the angels in praising God and he is not able prophecy on behalf of God. Furthermore, the people having the same condition only compounds the problem. It further pollutes Isaiah’s own soul, he rooted in sin, he has sprung from sinners, and he is identified with a sinful people. It also means Isaiah has no human recourse. He cannot go to the wise men among the people, to the sages, the prophets, the honorable or the priests; before God, everyone is filthy! We could say, this is the gospel of Paul in visionary form:

**Romans 3:4** 4 May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “That You may be justified in Your words, And prevail when You are judged.” (cf. Ps. 51.4)

**Romans 3:19** 19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;

Finally, being “unclean” (טָמֵא) would also make Isaiah ceremonially unclean and covenantally alienated from God. Amazing! Here is a scene in which a member of the covenant community, a prophet, as well as the entire nation who has been implicated in the sin of the prophet; all of them collectively stand in alienation from God (this would have also given Isaiah a new found empathy for the people knowing that he was no better than they). So then, this text has as much to do with how, Isaiah and the nation, will come into a covenant bond with God. The thing to see here is that sin alienates us from God:

**Ephesians 2:11–12** 11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

*The Righteousness Of The King*

Isaiah’s crisis of catharsis was rooted in the righteousness of God. If God is so holy that even His glorified beings cannot but hide their faces from His glorious presence, how can Isaiah possibly survive the heavenly vision? By establishing the vision in the royal court of the heavenly temple, the vision now moves to the justice system of the heavenly tribunal. Isaiah finds himself amidst the heavenly council of the *Elohim* beings, both God and the heavenly hosts. And here something is demanded of him, namely that he be holy even as His Father is holy (cf. Lev. 11.44; 19.2; 20.7). Leviticus was written to stress the nature of God’s holiness and the demands for holiness:

**Leviticus 1:1–5** 1 Then the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, 2 “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of animals from the herd or the flock. 3 ‘If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. 4 ‘He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. 5 ‘He shall slay the young bull before the Lord; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

**Leviticus 11:44–45** 44 ‘For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth. 45 ‘For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.’ ”

It is as if Isaiah finds himself there, at the true doorway in the true tent of meeting where atonement must be made, and burnt offering must be pleasing to the Lord, if Isaiah is to be “accepted before the Lord.” The causal conjunction in the Hebrew indicates the second reason for Isaiah’s alarm, “for [or because] I have seen the Kind, the Lord of hosts” (v.5). Heaven, the seraphim, the Glory Realm in which he sees himself was enough to illuminate his own sinful alienation, his unworthiness and his unfitness for such a holy habitation, and yet, it is infinitely compounded by the sight of Him, “the King.” His experience is now rational; he does not belong because he is an offense to the King of the Glory-Realm. Furthermore, the King is also the *Lord Sabbaoth* (יְהוָ֥ה צְבָא֖וֹת), the One who has the power to exact the punishment that is rooted in His divine law deliberated in His divine council.

*The Demands Of The King*

There are the demands of the King. God is a holy God. His law holy and good (cf. Rom. 7.12). His creatures, fallen and sinful. As the vision develops, Isaiah is quite passive in the whole experience. There is nothing he can do and there is nothing that he does. This is to remind the creature that no amount cultic activity, religious devotion, or deeds of righteousness can acquit us before the King of Heaven. In fact, Isaiah himself knew well, that his only appeal was to the sovereign grace of the King, no amount of law-keeping will suffice:

**Deuteronomy 27:26** 26 ‘Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

Isaiah, knew that the Law was powerless to save. And today it is at this critical juncture that people go astray. Man always seeks to justify himself. They seek life in themselves. They attempt to rescue themselves, work for themselves, deliver themselves and save themselves. Paul reminds us of the impossibility of autosoteric religion:

**Galatians 2:20–21** 20 “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. 21 “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”

*The Provisions Of The King*

But as it were, the very King who demands this impossible righteousness from us has provided a means of righteousness for us. The provision of the righteousness that God demands is situated in the language of the altar and the presence of the “burning coal” is indicative that something has been *burned* there. We must therefore focus our attention on what may appear to be an unlikely imagery when considering the remedy of Isaiah’s sinful condition, namely the ‘living stone’ or the “burning coal” (רִצְפָּה). Several gospel-centered observation may be made here. *Frist*, notice that these living stones of fire are brought to the unworthy creature, “Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand” (v.6a). The cleansing that Isaiah will undergo is the cleansing that all people need and that cleansing is rooted in the gracious hand of the King of heaven. *Second*, notice that the cleansing stone is outside of Isaiah; it is an alien purity. What theologians call, an alien righteousness which is *extra nos*. A righteousness totally foreign to Isaiah, provided to Isaiah, and applied to Isaiah a mediating angel. This foreign righteousness is at the essence of true gospel.

The “woe” of Isaiah becomes the “rubbish” of Paul for both understood their inability to provide themselves with the righteousness that God requires:

**Philippians 3:7–9** 7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,

*Third*, notice also that Isaiah’s cleansing is rooted in the “altar” (מִזְבֵּחַ), that is, in the place where sacrifice is made. The altar is the place for atonement the place where provision is made for the sinner and an offering is rendered to God for appeasement. This offering both removes the sin of man and the wrath of God. There expiation and propitiation are provided. Here we are getting close to the essence of it all. So holy is this cultic locus that it is as if not even the seraphim will touch the altar without the use of some special instrument. Their “tongs” handle these precious burning stones before at last applying their redemptive power to the sin of the creature.

*The Christological Archetype*

Is it any wonder that the author of Hebrews speaks of a true tabernacle (8.2), a true sacrifice (1.3; 9.11-12), and ultimate offering (7.26-27), and even an altar (13.10, though the altar here may be referring to the cross itself, its sacrifice itself is rooted in the heavenly economy) in the upper register. These are the archetypal realities from which the earthly pattern and the earthly replicas are meant to both typify and foreshadow in terms of the consummate form of things (8.5). The reality coming from this Isaianic vision, is that of the power of the altar for, as Isaiah himself will go on to expound, it will be the Servant-Messiah himself is laying on the altar. The fire from the altar is rooted in the Levitical code, calling for a perpetual burnt offering, so that God would be pleased and a soothing aroma may pleasure Him (cf. Lev. 6.12-13). And thus, the “fire” of the altar, extended by the burning stones, is symbolic of life that dies on earth (the altar being a symbol of the earth, even as the laver is called the “sea” e.g. 1 Ki. 7.23ff.) but rises up into heaven; a symbolic reminder that the offering which dies and pleases God, will rise again. The sacrifice is thus ordered toward a heavenly realm, a higher form of life, eternal life in the Spirit. But this is exactly what Jesus did!

The Spirit-Architect designed all this and is speaking to us in all of this. It was prophetic not just for Isaiah, but for us as well, because the gospel is found here:

**Hebrews 9:8–10** 8 The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, 9 which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, 10 since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

*The Transfer of Sin and Transformation of Sinners*

Finally, Isaiah, is not only “forgiven” by God, he is “touched” by God, placing him in holy union with His God. He has been ceremonially, and more importantly, covenantally cleansed. He has also been forensically justified. These are all elements of the true gospel. All iniquity is dealt with at the altar of atonement. This is the place of imputation, the place of the great exchange for sinners where Christ dies in the stead of His people (cf. Heb. 10.14; John 10.11; 2 Cor. 5.14-15). Isaiah’s sin having an interest in the altar and the altar having an interest in Isaiah, it reminds us of the three levels of biblical imputation. Even as Isaiah bears his guilt, the sin nature having been imputed to him by Adam’s covenant headship, Christ upon the altar bears the sin of His people which God imputed to Him by way of vicarious substitutionary atonement, and finally, the well-pleasing all soothing aroma of Christ’s righteousness, the last Adam (1 Cor. 15.45), imputed to us by grace through faith:

**2 Corinthians 5:20–21** 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Having been justified freely by God’s grace, the result is a communion bond of covenant fellowship with God and with His people; what can be called the “Immanuel principle” where covenant fulness is reached at last through Christ. The covenantal is final not the forensic. We do not stand in relation to God as pardon felons to a judge but to a father in a loving familial bond. The gospel is about being loved by God through Jesus Christ, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us… made us alive” (Eph. 2.4, 5).There is a transfer and a transformation. We have been transferred from one state to another, one status to another, one condition and nature to another, one federal reality to another, one legal standing to another, and one realm to another realm— the realm of life, the realm of light, the realm of kingdom:

**Colossians 1:12–14** 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. 13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

But those who undergo this kingdom transfer also undergo a kingdom *transformation*. Having been justified, we will also be sanctified. Having put off the old man, we are to put on the new man (Col. 3.1-12), having been buried with Christ in baptism, we are raised up with Him in newness of life (Rom. 6.1-7). Having suffered under the dominion of sin, we now sacrifice, suffer, and serve under the dominion of righteousness (Rom. 6.17-19). Just as Isaiah undergoes here, a Spirit-wrought metamorphosis in a vision, we undergo the same transformation of the Spirit in Christ and thus seek to be conformed to the image of our Creator, even as Isaiah was who underwent a redemptive reenactment of the *Imago Dei* (following the pattern of Moses’ own Imago Dei reenactment, 2 Cor. 3.7 cf. Ex. 24.12-18; 34.29-35); we too are being transformed more and more into the Glory of the Glory Spirit:

**2 Corinthians 3:17–18** 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. 18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

This sanctifying transformative process whereby we are being conformed into the Image of the Spirit, into the image of the Son, an into the image of God will have a beautiful terminus. Herein lies the great promise of the gospel and the hope of all sinner everywhere. We will finally leave behind the remnants of all that remains of indwelling sin, all our sinful proclivities, and all aspects of the physical succumbing to the effects of the Fall and power of sin, and we will at last belong in heaven:

**1 Corinthians 15:49** 49 Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.