

Isaiah 6: Call, Sanctification, and Commissioning

Isaiah 6:1: *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.*

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *If Isaiah received his call in the year that Uzziah died, this historical work contained a retrospective view of the life and times of Uzziah, the close of which coincided with the call of the prophetic author, which made a deep incision into the history of Israel. Uzziah reigned fifty-two years (809-758 b.c.). This lengthened period was just the same to the kingdom of Judah as the shorter age of Solomon to that of all Israel, viz., a time of vigorous and prosperous peace, in which the nation was completely overwhelmed with manifestations of divine love. But the riches of divine goodness had no more influence upon it, than the troubles through which it had passed before. And now the eventful change took place in the relation between Israel and Jehovah, of which Isaiah was chosen to be the instrument before and above all other prophets. The year in which all this occurred was the year of Uzziah's death. It was in this year that Israel as a people was given up to hardness of heart, and as a kingdom and country to devastation and annihilation by the imperial power of the world. How significant a fact, as Jerome observes in connection with this passage, that the year of Uzziah's death should be the year in which Romulus was born; and that it was only a short time after the death of Uzziah (viz., 754 b.c. according to Varro's chronology) that Rome itself was founded! The national glory of Israel died out with king Uzziah and has never revived to this day.*

In that year, says the prophet, "I saw the Lord of all sitting upon a high and exalted throne, and His borders filling the temple." Isaiah saw, and that not when asleep and dreaming; but God gave him, when awake, an insight into the invisible world, by opening an inner sense for the supersensuous, whilst the action of the outer senses was suspended, and by condensing the supersensuous into a sensuous form, on account of the composite nature of man and the limits

of his present state. This was the mode of revelation peculiar to an ecstatic vision (ἐν ἑκστάσει, Eng. ver. "in a trance," or ἐν πνεύματι, "in the spirit"). Isaiah is here carried up into heaven; for although in other instances it was undoubtedly the earthly temple which was presented to a prophet's view in an ecstatic vision (Amos 9:1; Ezekiel 8:3; Ezekiel 10:4-5; cf., Acts 22:17), yet here, as the description which follows clearly proves, he is carried up to the "high and exalted throne."

Compare with 2 Corinthians 12:2: I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

Isaiah's Call occurs in the context of him being carried up into Heaven. Like the Prophetic Word, the Call is God's Providential action in the life of the world, a kind of divine *kenosis* or emptying that allows for limited and fallible man to see, to know, and to be taken up into Heaven for the sake of changing that man in such a way that he can be an instrumentality of God's will for the world. God calls a person in such a way that that person may choose God and no other, a clear and necessary prelude to receiving the grace by which he then may do what God commissions. The divine *kenosis* that is at the heart of the Call indicates that every true Call is in emulation of the Incarnation of God. A true Call leads to Christ Jesus and to no other. A true Call conforms to the covenant relationship that God has established with Israel and, through the Holy Spirit, with the Holy Church. Any Call that detracts from or contradicts the faith and practice of the Church is not a true Call from God. This is manifest in how Isaiah is taken up into Heaven while inside of the Temple. The Call ascends from faithfulness to the Temple and not in defiance of the Temple precepts, and the same logic will apply to the divine commissioning of Christians, namely, that a Christian is called when his call is blessed by the Holy Church and conforms to her teachings and to her Holy Sacraments. A Call is not to be confused with any ecstatic charism that is peculiar to a person and not tied to his or her fidelity to the Holy Church.

Isaiah 6:2: *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.*

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *This is the only passage in the Scriptures in which the seraphim are mentioned. According to the orthodox view, which originated with Dionysius the Areopagite, they stand at the head of the nine choirs of angels, the first rank consisting of seraphim, cherubim, and throni. And this is not without support, if we compare the cherubim mentioned in Ezekiel, which carried the chariot of the divine throne; whereas here the seraphim are said to surround the seat on which the Lord was enthroned. In any case, the seraphim and cherubim were heavenly beings of different kinds; and there is no weight in the attempts made by some scholars to prove that they are one and the same. And certainly, the name seraphim does not signify merely spirits as such, but even, if not the highest of all, yet a distinct order from the rest; for the Scriptures really teach that there are gradations in rank in the hierarchy of heaven. Nor were they mere symbols or fanciful images, as some imagine, but real spiritual beings, who visibly appeared to the prophet in a form related to their own supersensuous being.*

Compare with John 12:41: *These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him.*

Matthew Henry's Commentary: *In this figurative vision, the temple is thrown open to view, even to the most holy place. The prophet sees the Divine Presence seated on the mercy-seat, raised over the ark of the covenant, between the cherubim and seraphim, and the Divine glory filled the whole temple. See God upon his throne. This vision is explained, Joh 12:41, that Isaiah now saw Christ's glory, and spake of Him, which is a full proof that our Savior is God. In Christ Jesus, God is seated on a throne of grace; and through him the way into the holiest is laid open. See God's temple, his church on earth, filled with his glory. His train, the skirts of his robes, filled the temple, the whole world, for it is all God's temple. And yet he dwells in every contrite heart. See the blessed attendants by whom his government is served. Above the throne stood the holy angels, called seraphim, which means burners; they burn in love to God, and zeal for his glory against sin. The seraphim showing their faces veiled, declares that they are ready to yield*

obedience to all God's commands, though they do not understand the secret reasons of his counsels, government, or promises. All vainglory, ambition, ignorance, and pride would be done away by one view of Christ in his glory. This awful vision of the Divine Majesty overwhelmed the prophet with a sense of his own vileness. We are undone if there is not a Mediator between us and this holy God. A glimpse of heavenly glory is enough to convince us that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. Nor is there a man that would dare to speak to the Lord, if he saw the justice, holiness, and majesty of God, without discerning his glorious mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. The live coal may denote the assurance given to the prophet, of pardon, and acceptance in his work, through the atonement of Christ. Nothing is powerful to cleanse and comfort the soul, but what is taken from Christ's satisfaction and intercession. The taking away sin is necessary to our speaking with confidence and comfort, either to God in prayer, or from God in preaching; and those shall have their sin taken away who complain of it as a burden and see themselves in danger of being undone by it. It is great comfort to those whom God sends, that they go for God, and may therefore speak in his name, assured that he will bear them out.

What is seen is as revelatory as what is obscured. What is spoken is as revelatory as what is not spoken. The Call is for a life to be taken up into divinity and, in the case of the Angels, heavenly beings that mediate divinity. The Call is for a life to be conformed to this heavenly world. Thus, the nature of the Call is not to bring God down to man so much as to bring man up to God, first the man so called, and then the others who will hear the Prophetic Word which that man offers to the world thereafter. God the Father is the endpoint of the Call. God the Son allows for man to be made holy, which is what makes it possible for a man to be in the presence of the Father, so we can say that God the Son is the intercessory bridge for this Call. God the Spirit allows for man to be like the Incarnate Son by burning away whatever sin acts as an obstruction between man and the Incarnate Son. The cleansing fire associated with the Seraphim thus is a revelation of the Holy Spirit in particular, and so we can say that God the Spirit is the cleansing fire for this Call. The Call is an expression of the Triune God, a grace that leads to God, through God, and by that cleansing that is effectuated by God. There is no true Call apart from the Trinity of God and therefore faith in the Trinity of God. In the time of Isaiah, the Trinity of God had not yet been

revealed, but there are hints of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in this vision which are developed later in Isaiah's prophetic ministry into a foreshadowing of the Trinity of God.

Isaiah 6:3: *And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.*

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *Isaiah heard this antiphonal or "hypophonal" song of the seraphim, not merely that he might know that the uninterrupted worship of God was their blessed employment, but that he might glimpse the Apocalyptic character of God's revelation. God is in Himself the Holy One (kâdōsh), i.e., the separate One, beyond or above the world, true light, spotless purity, the perfect One. His glory (Câbod) is His manifested holiness, just as, on the other hand, His holiness is His veiled or hidden glory. The design of all the work of God is that His holiness should become universally manifest, or what is the same thing, that His glory should become the fulness of the whole earth (Isaiah 11:9; Numbers 14:21; Habakkuk 2:14). This design of the work of God stands before God as eternally present; and the seraphim also have it ever before them in its ultimate completion, as the theme of their song of praise. But Isaiah was a man living in the very midst of the history that was moving on towards this goal; and the cry of the seraphim, in the precise form in which it reached him, showed him to what it would eventually come on earth, whilst the heavenly shapes that were made visible to him helped him to understand the nature of that divine glory with which the earth was to be filled. The whole of the book of Isaiah contains traces of the impression made by this ecstatic vision.*

Barnes' Notes on the Bible: *And one cried to another - Hebrew 'This cried to this.' That is, they cried to each other in alternate responses. One cried 'holy;' the second repeated it; then the third; and then they probably united in the grand chorus, 'Full is all the earth of his glory.' This was an ancient mode of singing or recitative among the Hebrews; see Exodus 15:20-21, where Miriam is represented as going before in the dance with a timbrel, and the other females as following her, and "answering," or responding to her, Psalm 136:1.*

Holy, holy, holy - The "repetition" of a name, or of an expression, three times, was quite common among the Jews. Thus, in Jeremiah 7:4, the Jews are represented by the prophet as saying, 'the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these. Thus, Jeremiah 22:29 : 'O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the Lord;' Ezekiel 21:27 : 'I will overturn, overturn, overturn;' see also 1 Samuel 18:23 : 'O my son Absalom! my son, my son;' see also the repetition of the form of benediction among the Jews, Numbers 6:24-26.

God is holy. God intends for His created universe to be holy like Him. The nature of that which is made holy like Him is to worship Him as He is to be worshipped. Thus, the vision is liturgical and teaches that we are made holy in and through our liturgical worship of God, so long as how and what we worship is pleasing to Him. What we think of God, and even what we say about God to the world, are not enough, for our relationship with Him is not limited to our abstracted mental life. Our relationship is also meant to be experienced sensually, for we are made as sensual beings with a mind and a soul (the Christian view of man) and not only as devolved creatures of mind (the Gnostic view of man). The Call is carried up into the organic and liturgical life of the Church. The person who is called by God maintains the integrity of the *praxis* as much as the *credo* of the covenant relationship between God and man. For the fulfillment of God's will on earth is a matter of *praxis* as much as it is a matter of *credo*. God is not just concerned with what we are believing but in how we are liturgically worshipping Him. From this we learn that liturgy is not just expressive of our love for God but is a mechanism by which God makes us holy. This fits in with the theology of the Holy Sacraments as *Corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ, for it is not by coincidence that the holy praise of God is liturgical, takes place in Heaven and in the Temple, and occasions the sacramental cleansing of Isaiah for his commissioning.

Isaiah 6:4: And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

Compare with 1 Kings 8:10: And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord.

Compare with Psalm 18:7: *Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations also of the hills moved and were shaken, because he was wroth.*

God blesses that on which He descends, as when God's Spirit descends upon the Temple that had been built by King Solomon. God also cleanses that on which He descends, and from the perspective of the sinner that cleansing is divine judgment and wrath. God's mercy and God's judgment are one and the same. We mentally distinguish the two, but we see through a glass, darkly. The only right response on our part is to acknowledge our unworthiness before Him in every way, that is, to acknowledge His judgment of us as righteous as much as we may ask for His mercy. The earthquake and the smoke are manifestations of His divinity descending down to us and an impetus for us to respond in the one way that is efficacious for our own spiritual and physical health. The point is that we can fence sit when so confronted and must choose to embrace the moment by falling on our face before God in true humility or choose damnation. Notice then the necessity of our free will response to God's judgment and mercy in the context of God's Call: We are called but must exercise our free will to choose God when God makes it clear that there is no viable choice but Him or our damnation. The Call is never imposed on us against our free will, for the Call arises from love for us and asks for a loving response in return. The fact that God makes the choice so stark is actually indicative of His love, for He eliminates at that moment the mental ambiguity by which the person called may be tricked by his limited and fallible mind. There is no mental trickery available to the devil, so the choice is very clear.

Isaiah 6:5: *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.*

Compare with Matthew 8:8: *The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.*

Our first response to God's unambiguous Call must be an acknowledgment on our part that we are unworthy of God and His self-revelation. We respond affirmatively first by stating without prevarication that, indeed, we are unworthy to respond affirmatively. This is not a false humility put on for other people to see how virtuous we are. God is not fooled. The humility must be of the kind that is not only sincere but seeks God to rectify in us what makes us unworthy. Thus, in the case of the Centurion, he not only says that he is unworthy to have his Lord under his roof. He goes on to ask his Lord "to speak the word only." What word is that? The divine Word which alone rectifies what the Centurion's unworthiness and heals the servant. So, proper humility is not self-deprecation. It is acknowledging the truth of the situation and asking for divine grace to heal what the humble person cannot heal himself. The end of humility is not negation but being exalted, not by oneself, but by God's intercession.

Isaiah 6:6-7: 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.

Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary: *This confession was followed by the forgiveness of his sins, of which he received an attestation through a heavenly sacrament, and which was conveyed to him through the medium of a seraphic absolution. "And one of the seraphim flew to me with a red-hot coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said, Behold, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away; and so thy sin is expiated." One of the beings hovering round the Lord (there were, therefore, a large and indefinite number) flew to the altar of incense - the heavenly original of the altar of incense in the earthly temple, which was reckoned as belonging to the Most Holy Place - and took from this altar a ritzpâh, i.e., either a red-hot stone, or, according to the prevailing tradition, a red-hot coal, and that with a pair of tongs, because even a seraph's hand cannot touch the vessels consecrated to God, or the sacrifices that belong to Him. With this red-hot coal he flew to Isaiah, and having touched his mouth with it, i.e., that member of his body of whose uncleanness he had more especially complained (cf., Jeremiah 1:9, where the prophet's*

mouth is touched by Jehovah's hand, and made eloquent in consequence), he assured him of the forgiveness of his sins, which coincided with the application of this sacramental sign.

Notice how the forgiveness of Isaiah's unworthiness and the cleansing of his sin is performed by the Seraphim intermediary in a liturgical manner. God does not need outward signs for inward acts of grace. People do. The reason is that we humans are inclined toward the perversion of all abstracted truths. Sacramental experience takes the truth of the situation and makes it sensual, indeed, even incarnational, a foreshadowing of Jesus as the Incarnation of the Truth. No longer purely abstracted forgiveness and cleansing, we are less able to pervert what has been done for us in our own minds. Also, God forgives/cleanses us for the purpose of making us still humans – thus creatures who know through their senses and incarnated experiences – but also more like him – thus creatures who are pious toward what is holy and, over time, holy themselves. Notice the piety of the Seraphim in not touching the hot coal with his own hands. We should emulate the Seraphim's piety in our own context so that we too learn to value what is holy as *a priori* to becoming holy ourselves. We come to God through sacramental experience of His holiness, not just through our mental reverence of His Word. Thus, God forgives/cleanses Isaiah liturgically.

Isaiah 6:8: 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.

Notice that God refers to Himself in the singular ("Whom shall I send") and in the plural ("Who will go for us?"), which is not to be confused with the "Royal We." The "Royal We" asks, "Whom shall we send?" Thus, this is not a reference only to the majesty of God. This is a foreshadowing of God's self-revelation as One in Three Persons. God is revealing Himself more intimately here to Isaiah than He has to anyone else thus far. God is revealing more because Isaiah will be asked to do more than others in setting the stage for the coming of Christ Jesus. What God is saying in this deepened level of self-revelation is that He is "all in" for Isaiah for the work Isaiah will do. In return, Isaiah needs to be "all in" for God in accepting the commission. Isaiah responds to God with "Here am I," which is his response specifically to "Whom shall I send." As God reveals that

He is unitary with His phrase, so Isaiah reveals that his commitment to God will be unitary with his phrase. Isaiah will be “unitary” in the sense of not allowing any other pursuit to sidetrack his vocation. Isaiah responds to God with “send me,” which is his response specifically to “Who will go for us?” As God reveals that He is Three Persons with His phrase, so Isaiah reveals that He is going to be sent out also as a revelation of God. God’s self-revelation as Triune reveals who He is in Himself and also *His economia*, which is to say, the manner by which He interacts with and redeems the world. Thus, if Isaiah is sent out to preach the Prophetic Word, which is to say, to be the instrumentality of God’s grace changing the world, then Isaiah will be in line with *God’s economia*. Isaiah is saying “send me” because he trusts that God will be working through Him.