

A HEART FOR THE WORLD STARTS HERE

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HOW ISAIAH'S VISION HELPS ME OVERCOME MY NEARSIGHTEDNESS

I have a vision problem—a form of nearsightedness. This particular sort of nearsightedness causes me to live a small, self-centered life. Though there's a whole world out there, I have trouble seeing past the rim of my own comfortable existence. I've tried to expand my vision with information about the larger world. Consider the following:

- An estimated one billion people go to bed hungry or malnourished every night.
- Both in our country and globally, there are millions of homeless people—refugees from war, disasters, famine, and tangled lives.
- There are more than a billion Muslims, more than a billion people in the nation of India, and 1.3 billion people in China—most of whom have no knowledge of God's love expressed through Jesus Christ.

Statistics such as these could make me feel guilty for a while, and I'd temporarily become more caring about the world's vast needs. But I always seemed to revert to my familiar nearsightedness. What would it take to achieve a consistently caring heart for the world and its needs? I'd wonder.

Enter Isaiah the prophet. I'd often heard exhortations toward

witness or service or missions from Isaiah's famous "here I am, send me" response in Isaiah 6, but for a long time I had failed to investigate what led to that response. It wasn't Isaiah's expression of belief that one person can make a difference. It didn't come from a conviction regarding the world's needs. When I looked deeper, Isaiah taught me that global vision starts with a vision of who God is. The results of this vision: a renewed sense of worship, a clearer sense of the message my redemption proclaims, and a fresh compassion for a lost world.

LOOKING UPWARD

In Isaiah 6, the prophet confronts a personal and ministry crisis. King Uzziah, king of Judah for more than 50 years, a king Isaiah knew and prophesied under—he even recorded "the other events of Uzziah's reign, from beginning to end" (2 Chron. 26:22)—this king had died. In the face of a world in dynamic transition, Isaiah looked upward.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.

And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the

sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. —Is. 6:1-4

Isaiah saw the majesty of God and was reminded of God’s attributes. God’s unchanging rule. The throne of Israel was in transition, but God is still “seated on a throne.”

GOD’S HOLINESS. The seraphs hiding their faces and feet present a picture reflected in their worship song: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty.” Isaiah sees God transcendent. He is “wholly other,” untainted, without law or imperfection.

GOD’S GLORY. Rather than just seeing his own world of Israel-in-transition, God gives Isaiah a vision of the whole world. In a flash, Isaiah is reminded that he stands before the maker of the ends of the earth who fills “the whole earth” with His glory.

GOD’S AWESOME POWER. God is not some large, benevolent being sitting helplessly in a heavenly rocking chair. Isaiah sees the almighty God of power. The shaking doorposts and temple full of smoke picture God’s powerful presence, a power that provokes the “fear” or reverence of God.

Isaiah’s experience reminds me that my global passion must emanate from my upward look at who God is. If I go into the

world without this vision of God at the foundation, I will get overwhelmed by the needs, become discouraged by the challenges, or revert to apathy. To renew my view of God—ruler of the universe—I must take time each day and each week to worship. I come before God to see Him again, to worship and bow down, to realign myself with the one whose glory fills the earth, and to offer myself to Him in response. Worship—acknowledging that it is God, not me, who controls the universe—refuels my vision.

An encounter with the awesome God changes me and enlarges my worship; this keeps my view of the world in perspective. If I'm going to have sustained "big picture" vision, my starting point must be looking upward at the God who loves the whole world.

LOOKING INWARD

Isaiah's vision didn't just ask him to look upward at God; it also gave him an inward look at himself. As a prophet, Isaiah had already pronounced the judgment of God on others—"Woe to you!" (Isaiah 5)—but in God's overwhelming presence he sees his true self and cries out another "Woe!":

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." —v. 5

Isaiah sees God, but rather than delight or excitement, his first word is the word of a prophet: “Woe!” Our rough equivalent might be, “I’m doomed!” Isaiah has been living in the darkness. Like a man wearing a white suit in a darkened coal mine, he has no idea how dirty he is—until the awesomeness of God shines the light on him. He sees his unworthy state before a holy God. Conviction goes right to the core of Isaiah’s being: his lips. The focus of Isaiah’s life and ministry was his speaking. He served God through his words; yet, at the point of his potentially greatest strength, Isaiah realized his inadequacy before God: “I am a man of unclean lips.”

When I look upward and see God in His holiness, I am compelled to look inward and confront my own spiritual inadequacy. I am a sinner. Even the gifts I might offer in something so noble as world vision are tainted before a holy God. My righteousness is “filthy rags” before Him. To do what God wants me to do in the world, I cannot depend on natural ability. I must come as a sinner into His presence, allow Him to clean me up for His purposes, and then reoffer my gifts of service to God in response.

Isaiah’s look inward continues a step deeper. After his confession of personal sin, he also realizes the corruption of his society: “and I live among a people of unclean lips” (v. 5). Accepting responsibility for the sins of our culture seldom comes into our

confession—either personally or corporately as the church. But Isaiah identifies himself with the rebellious culture he was part of. Contrast Isaiah’s confession with the observation of A. W. Tozer:

We have a deadened sense of sin in the church. The very word sin is not in good standing in present-day philosophy and psychology. The intellectuals have put us on the defensive and have made us ashamed to believe in sin as a reality.

Isaiah’s vision reminds us that God has not changed. He is still holy, and we are still sinners. In the words of the confession in The Book of Common Prayer, we are “miserable offenders.” We need someone to redeem us, to forgive us, to restore us to right relationship with God. Yet Isaiah’s experience also presents us with the good news of the gospel as God sends an angel to purify Isaiah.

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” —vv. 6-7

God’s redemption and forgiveness enable Isaiah to stand before Him as a cleansed worshiper and willing servant. If I want a proper global view, a proper sense of what it means to be a man of God, I must come low before God lifts me up. There must be brokenness before healing, repentance before forgiveness. An

inward vision of my sinfulness and the sinfulness of my society keeps me from condemning and judging other people and their societies. When I realize the greatness of God’s forgiveness, I cannot help but have grace toward others. Like the sinner in Luke 18, I go into the world with the humble prayer: “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (v. 13).

Isaiah’s experience teaches me that to sustain world vision, I need a look inward that reminds me of the message we bring: Through Jesus Christ, God has dealt with our sinfulness and its consequences.

LOOKING OUT WARD

The upward view of a holy, glorious God-of-the-universe followed by an inward discovery of Isaiah’s sinfulness and the sinfulness of his society prepares Isaiah for outward vision. God’s grace communicates forgiveness to Isaiah. Then, as a sinful yet forgiven and redeemed worshiper, Isaiah hears the call of God.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” —v. 8

Isaiah isn’t singled out; he “overhears” God’s call. If we let the Spirit of God bring us face-to-face with Him and convict and cleanse us of sin, then we too will hear the beckoning of God, and we will respond as Isaiah did.

Often I've thought that Isaiah's response was offered in a somber mood of worship. Having been brought low by encountering his own sinfulness, I once imagined him sheepishly raising his hand and saying, "Here I am, Lord. Send me."

As I've thought about Isaiah's worship experience, I've wondered if my initial assumption was wrong. Perhaps Isaiah entered the vision proud of being a prophet, but that pride has been burned away by the majesty of God. Maybe he thought himself a good communicator; now he knows he's part of the "unclean lips" people.

His motives purged, he hears God as a freshly redeemed sinner. God offers the invitation: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" I envision Isaiah jumping up, wiping away the tears and waving, "I want to go! I feel so light and forgiven and redeemed! In gratitude, Lord, I say, 'Here I am! Send me!'"

Whenever my vision for the world starts shrinking, I return to Isaiah 6. Isaiah's experience teaches me that if I am to sustain a passion for the world, I need a heart that cries out to serve this amazing God and spread this amazing message.

His vision helps me overcome my nearsighted, global apathy. In the face of God's glory, I find peace; I don't need to be

overwhelmed. God alone rules the world. In the face of God's holiness, I realize that I need to accept my sinfulness and the sins of my society. And in response to God's greatness and the wonder of being forgiven, I pray,

***SEND ME, O GOD.** Deliver me from small, peripheral prayers. You are Lord of the nations. The whole earth is full of Your glory. Use my prayers to have an impact on the world.*

***SEND ME, O GOD.** Deliver me from a puny, self-absorbed priority list. Let me live freely and generously, giving of my material wealth to serve those in need.*

***SEND ME, O GOD.** Deliver me from my addiction to security and self-preservation. I'm at Your disposal to take the good news of forgiveness through Jesus Christ across the street or across the world.*

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