

Main Idea: In Isaiah 6 we discover what can and should motivate us, particularly when our God-given mission is hard. In short, we need to learn to view our ministry as Isaiah learned to view his.

From last week...

- I. We need to see what Isaiah saw (1-2).
- II. We need to hear what Isaiah heard (3-4).
- III. We need to do what Isaiah did (5-8).
  - A. We must admit our guilt (5).
  - B. We must accept His cleansing (6-7).
  - C. We must avail ourselves for service (8).

This week...

- IV. We need to view our ministry as Isaiah viewed his (9-13).
  - A. God speaks (8a).
  - B. Isaiah answers (8b).
  - C. God speaks again (9-10).
    1. He tells Isaiah what to say (9).
    2. He tells Isaiah what to do (10a).
    3. He tells Isaiah why (10b).
  - D. Isaiah speaks (11a).
  - E. God answers (11b-13).
    1. He tells Isaiah he will preach until destruction comes (11-12).
    2. He tells Isaiah a holy remnant will be preserved (13).

Application: What do we learn from Isaiah?

1. God never said it would be easy to serve Him.
2. Not all ministries are created equal.
3. God wants us to focus on the depth of our ministries and let Him take care of the breadth of them.
4. When it comes to ministry, the results are up to God.

The Lord asks us to do hard things at times. I think of you moms, and the assignment God has given you. A privileged assignment, yes. But also an assignment that demands self-denial and self-sacrifice 24/7 if it's to be done God's way.

I think of you dads too. You can't be the world's kind of man *and* fulfill your God-given mission, for to be a dad that pleases God, you must parent with eternity in mind, which means you must do hard things, things that do *not* bring immediate gratification.

And I can't help but think of missionaries serving in difficult places. Taking three or four years to raise financial and prayer support, then investing another three or four years to learn a language and a culture in a place that does *not* want you. Followed by rejection, loneliness, and an ever present danger, which is the experience of those front line servants in places throughout the 10/40.

Of course, *your* ministry involves hardship too, no matter who you are and what it is. Representing Jesus in a godless work environment, or being a godly student at a school, or working with youth who don't trust anyone after all the broken promise they've heard, or caring for the needs of the poor. Whatever your ministry is, it's filled with challenges and setbacks.

So what can motivate us to keep going, to experience joy in the midst of the challenges? We find the answer right here in today's text.

In Isaiah 6 we discover what can and should motivate us, particularly when our God-given mission is hard. In short, we need to learn to view our ministry as Isaiah the prophet learned to view his.

I want to turn this message around and take you to the end first, then back up and show you the beginning, and then retrace our steps to the end and look at it more

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

carefully. I want us to see at the outset the challenging mission to which Isaiah was called, then go back and see the motivation that kept him on task.

So notice verse 9, “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.”

Now there’s a hard assignment for a preacher, and it was Isaiah’s. Go preach, but there will be no fruit except for the assurance that your preaching will harden hearts.

For how long? A few months? A couple of years? That’s what Isaiah wanted to know. Verse 11, “For how long, O Lord?”

And the Lord’s answer? Verse 11, “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant.” Verse 12, “Until the LORD has sent everyone far away.”

That’s what I call a challenging mission. And that’s the mission to which Isaiah was called when he said, “Here am I. Send me!”

So what would motivate a man to put his heart and soul into that kind of mission? We find the answer by backing up to the opening verses of the chapter. Something just happened to Isaiah that profoundly changed him.

As we saw last Sunday, three things happened to Isaiah that launched him into this daunting ministry God planned for him. They became the basis of his motivation for his mission, and the same will be true of us.

### I. We need to see what Isaiah saw (1-2).

What did Isaiah see? Something incredible. Something life-changing. Something that launched him into his ministry. He saw the *Lord*. That’s what verse 1 says, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.”

The year his king died, the king who brought five decades of prosperity and stability to his land, he saw the Lord. That’s significant. When people are big in your life, you won’t serve God as you ought. But once the Lord becomes what He is, BIG, once He takes His rightful place, the fear of man begins to lose its grip.

Watch it happen in Isaiah’s life. In verse 5 he confesses the One he sees on the heavenly throne to be *The King*, the LORD Almighty. And what’s this king doing? As Isaiah gazed at the Lord, he’s impressed that this king is *sitting* (not fretting or pacing) *on a throne*.

That’s what Isaiah saw. You say, “If only I could see that! I’d serve the Lord!” The fact is, we did just see it, if we have eyes to see. God has revealed Himself to us in His Word, and in Isaiah 6 we’ve just seen through Isaiah’s eyes this revelation of the One who is *The King*.

### II. We need to hear what Isaiah heard (3-4).

He heard the seraphim calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty (3).” What’s true of The King? He is one of a kind, in a class all by Himself, unrivaled, set apart...*holy*.

As human beings in a sin-cursed world, we’re so prone to minimize and marginalize the Creator God. The two actions go hand in hand. We minimize Him, that is, shrink Him, gut Him, bring Him down to our size. And once that happens, it’s easy to marginalize Him, to tack Him onto our crowded lives and call on Him only when we think we need Him.

But the One who is holy, holy, holy will not be minimized and marginalized. That’s unthinkable, for He deserves center stage over all He rules.

“The whole earth is full of His glory,” affirm the seraphim unceasingly. There’s not a place on the planet where His glory isn’t on display.

Again, that’s what we need to hear. Not audibly, but the effect will be the same, as we open our hearts to hear what the seraphim are saying to us in the record of God’s revelation. We need to hear that God is holy and glorious.

Thirdly...

### III. We need to do what Isaiah did (5-8).

The effect of being in the presence of God for Isaiah was profound. It produced a threefold response, as it must do in our lives as well.

**A. We must admit our guilt (5).** When you realize that you are in the presence of the One who is holy, and His presence is worldwide, meaning you can’t escape it, here’s the effect it produces, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips.”

In other words, “I am guilty!

Is admitting guilt a good thing? Not according to the world, nor does it fit our natural bent. We’d rather blameshift, or deny, or cover up the guilt feelings with a bottle, or a click on the screen.

But the truth is, admitting guilt is precisely what’s needed, for we *are* guilty. We have fallen short of God’s holy standard.

Yet He doesn’t want us to stay in that position. Which is why, once we admit our guilt...

**B. We must accept His cleansing (6-7).** And praise God cleansing is available! For Isaiah it took the form of a seraph going to the altar, taking a live coal and putting it on his dirty mouth. Then came the announcement, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is *taken away* and your sin *atoned for*.”

There’s what a guilty sinner needs. Atonement. To have his sins covered so they no longer offend the One who is holy. And that’s what the One who is holy provided for Isaiah, as He does for us.

In His mercy and grace, He offers us cleansing. Not through a coal on an altar, but through what that coal on the altar anticipated, the cross of God’s own Son. For 700 years after the Lord cleansed Isaiah, He Himself robed Himself with human flesh, lived a perfect life, then sacrificed that perfect life on the altar of the cross as an atoning sacrifice for hell bound sinners. But that’s not the end, for the One who sacrificed His life came back to life on the third day, then returned to heaven, and now offers cleansing to all who will admit their guilt and believe in Him.

Perhaps you’re here today and you feel guilty before God. That actually could be a good thing, for the guilt you feel is God’s kind way of saying, “You’re in trouble, but I’ve provided a remedy.”

If you want to be right with the One who is holy, you must admit your guilt and receive the cleansing that God offers you through His Son. You can’t earn it. You can’t pay Him for it with your good works. You must simply receive it by faith.

You say, “That’s all? Just accept it by faith?” To be cleansed, yes. But know this. That will not be all, for when a person receives what God freely gives, something happens to the recipient of this grace.

It’s what happened to Isaiah in verse 8, and it will happen in our lives too.

**C. We must avail ourselves for service (8).** “Here am I! Send me!”

So now we see the motivation for ministry. It’s not a guilt trip (“Isaiah, you better preach or God will get you”). Nor is it offering temporal rewards (“Isaiah, if you go into

the ministry, you'll get a big house and a lot of money"). That won't cut it, not when ministry gets hard.

Here's what compels people to say yes to serving God, no matter what the cost. It's when they see God as He is, holy and glorious. And then see themselves as they are, unclean and guilty before God. And then when they learn that this holy God is also filled with mercy and compassion and has graciously provided a way for them to be clean. And they don't have to do anything for this cleansing, except receive it, by receiving the One who provided this cleansing for them, Jesus the Christ.

When that happens to a person, here's the natural, or I should say *supernatural* response. *Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee.*

Moms and dads, do you want your kids to serve God with their lives? Then don't try to guilt trip them into it, or motivate them with clichés and worldly trinkets. Help them get to know God as He is, holy and glorious. Then help them see themselves as they are, sinners who are helpless. And then introduce them to the One who loves helpless sinners enough to offer them cleansing through His Son. And once, by His grace, they experience His cleansing, they'll know only one response is fitting.

*Here I am! Send me!*

I'm challenged by what happened to Isaiah next. He had an intriguing conversation with God that opened up his eyes to the nature of the ministry God prepared for him. And there's a lesson here for us that I want to spell out at the outset.

#### IV. We need to view our ministry as Isaiah viewed his (9-13).

If God has saved you by His grace, He's given you a tailor-made ministry. "For by grace are you saved," says Ephesians 2:8, followed by, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God has before ordained that we walk in them (Eph 2:10)."

So God has designed a life of ministry for His children. We're saved to serve Him and others. But how should we view this ministry? As Isaiah did. And how was that?

Let's walk through this dialogue carefully. First...

**A. God speaks (8a).** In verse 8 Isaiah says he heard the Lord ask two questions. What were they?

#1 "Whom shall I send?"

#2 "Who will go for us?"

So God had a job to do, and He was looking for someone, a messenger, to do it for Him. *Whom shall I send?* Send where? He doesn't specify, not here. *Who will go for us?* Again, go where? We'll find out in a moment. And who is *us*? He doesn't specify (perhaps a reference to the Trinity?).

After God speaks...

**B. Isaiah answers (8b).** Notice what he says, "Here am I. Send me!"

What do those words indicate about Isaiah?

The NIV uses an exclamation point after "Send me (!)." That's a matter of interpretation. What was Isaiah's tone of voice in this response? In the light of the earlier context, where Isaiah is totally overwhelmed by the spectacular holiness of God, my hunch is he's not shouting this response. He's not demanding God. He is availing Himself to God. Having just been cleansed he's now eager to serve.

Mercy motivates mission. When you've received divine mercy, you're thrilled to participate in divine mission.

How could it be otherwise? We used to be His enemy. But He spared us, and now invites us to participate with Him in a ministry to others who are where we once were.

Indeed, mercy motivates mission. So why is it that so many who profess Christ are unwilling to serve Him wholeheartedly? There's no simple answer. It could be a fundamental problem. Just *saying* you've received mercy doesn't mean it's true. For some, it's an empty claim, and if the genuine experience of mercy is missing, the mission will be a grind rather than a privilege.

But even for those who have received mercy, it's easy to forget. And when we lose sight of mercy, our mission likewise becomes a grind. Oh, how we need fresh reminders of the mercy we've received! And one of the most powerful reminders happens when we share it with others.

So it's mercy that motivates Isaiah in verse 8. *Here am I. Send me!*

What do you think Isaiah has in mind here? What kind of ministry does he anticipate? I think we find a clue back in verse 5. In verse 5 there were two things that bothered Isaiah. First, his own sin ("I am a man of unclean lips"), but also his people's sin ("I live among a people of unclean lips"). The Lord just sent the seraph to take care of the first problem, as we saw, and the atoning coal removed Isaiah's guilt.

But what about his people's guilt? That's still an unresolved issue, and it's still on Isaiah's heart. That may be what Isaiah has in mind here.

*Here I am. Send me.* In other words, Lord, send me to the people around me who have unclean lips just like I did. And God did, but not as Isaiah anticipated.

In verses 9-10...

**C. God speaks again (9-10).** And He gives Isaiah a twofold message...

1. *He tells Isaiah what to say (9).* "Go and tell *this people*." What people? The Jews in Judah in the eighth century BC. The people Isaiah just described in chapter 5. In fact, the very people Isaiah just pronounced six woes upon in chapter 5.

What was the spiritual condition of the people in Isaiah's day? Oh, they were religious, but it was empty. Basically, they were like rebellious children with God (1:2). They were a sinful nation loaded with guilt (1:4).

They thought all God wanted was their sacrifices, so they brought multitudes of them (1:11). And they kept their holy days, their Sabbaths and convocations, as if those would merit God's favor (1:13). But God said in chapter one, "They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them... See how this faithful city has become a harlot! (1:14, 20)."

Those were the people to whom Isaiah was to minister. And what did God want him to tell them? Hold on to your seats...

"Be ever hearing, but never understanding. Be ever seeing, but never perceiving."

When was the last time you ever heard a message like that? You say, "It sounds like God didn't want His people to understand His Word any longer."

And the tragic reality is, that's right. Why would God want Isaiah to preach a message telling His people to hear but *not* understand?

One purpose of preaching is restoration. But is that the only purpose? Does God ever use His Word to accomplish any other purpose? He did in Isaiah's day.

Notice, He tells Isaiah not only what to *say*, but also...

2. *He tells Isaiah what to do (10a).* What objective did God give Isaiah in his preaching? He tells him in the first part of verse 10, "Make the hearts of people calloused; make their ears dull, and close their eyes."

Hmmm. That sounds strange. Why would God want His message through Isaiah to *not* be understood. Why would He want Isaiah's message to "make the heart of this people fat," as the KJV puts it? We need not wonder, for at the end of verse 10...

3. *He tells Isaiah why (10b)*. Notice what He says, “Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

But wait. Isn't that the purpose of preaching, to help people see, hear, understand, turn, and be healed? That's a purpose, but apparently it's not the only purpose.

Beloved, this is a mystery of mysteries, and I cannot explain it fully. But according to God's Word, it's possible for people to pass the point of no return, to reject God and His Word so often that they forfeit further opportunity to hear His Word. And it's possible to be called to preach to a people who have done so.

Such was Isaiah's task. And Jeremiah's, too. You may recall that God told Jeremiah *not* to pray for his people any longer (see 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). In fact, God told Jeremiah that even if Moses and Samuel interceded, it wouldn't make any difference (15:1)!

We might say, “Well, that was just in OT times with OT prophets.” True, but can you think of anyone else who preached to people whose hearts were so hard He refused to give them more truth?

How about Jesus? Take a look at Matthew 13:10-17. Jesus is with His disciples. They ask Him a question in verse 10, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

And His answer? Verses 11-17, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

So why did Jesus speak in parables? Notice how Jesus quoted Isaiah 6 in His answer. And notice how He specifically says in verse 14, “In them [referring to the large crowds who came to hear Jesus back in verse 2] is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding...For this people's heart has become calloused...’”

So did He preach in parables because their hearts were hard, or did He preach in parables to harden their hearts? The answer seems to be *both*.

You say, “That's hard to fathom.” That's what Isaiah thought, too...

**D. Isaiah speaks (11a)**. Notice his question, “Then I said, ‘For how long, O Lord?’” You can sympathize with Isaiah, can't you? *How long must I preach a message that will harden people's hearts?*

The prophet is God's messenger. He doesn't create his message, but delivers the one God gives him, that is, if he's God's kind of messenger. And Isaiah was, because of what God did in his life in Isaiah 6.

And so, after Isaiah speaks...

**E. God answers (11b-13)**. For how long? Here's how long. The Lord tells Isaiah that two things must happen as a result of his preaching. Don't stop until they do.

1. *He tells Isaiah he will preach until destruction comes (11-12)*. That's verses 11-12, “And he answered: ‘Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, 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.’”

You will preach, Isaiah, until destruction comes to your country. And the record verifies that's what Isaiah did. He preached for the next six decades, and saw Assyria deport the Jews from the northern kingdom, and then watched the same hostile army destroy city after city in the southern kingdom where he lived.

Just like God said. But there's a second outcome.

2. *He tells Isaiah a holy remnant will be preserved (13).* "And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste." Interesting. Though a tenth remains in the land. The northern ten tribes went first in 722 BC. Is the tenth a reference to the remaining southern kingdom? Though the tenth remains, *it will again be laid waste.* And it was eventually, in 586 BC.

Verse 13 concludes, "But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

The destruction is coming, says the Lord, but I promise to leave a "stump in the land," a remnant out of which the nation will live again.

Who's the stump? *The holy seed.* A remnant of faithful Jews, like Isaiah, though which God will work to fulfill His promise to Abraham, ultimately by sending His Son into the world, the Messiah, *THE holy seed.*

Notice how Isaiah 6 begins with the spotlight on holiness, and ends with the same focus. God's holiness at the beginning. His people's holiness at the end.

So how would you like Isaiah's job? To get a fuller sense of what he faced, listen to *The Message*, a paraphrase by Eugene Peterson<sup>1</sup>:

"Go and tell this people:

" 'Listen hard, but you aren't going to get it;  
look hard, but you won't catch on.'  
Make these people blockheads,  
with fingers in their ears and blindfolds on their eyes,  
So they won't see a thing,  
won't hear a word,  
So they won't have a clue about what's going on  
and, yes, so they won't turn around and be made whole."

Astonished, I said,

"And Master, how long is this to go on?"  
He said, "Until the cities are emptied out,  
not a soul left in the cities—  
Houses empty of people,  
countryside empty of people.  
Until I, GOD, get rid of everyone, sending them off,  
the land totally empty.  
And even if some should survive, say a tenth,  
the devastation will start up again.  
The country will look like pine and oak forest  
with every tree cut down—  
Every tree a stump, a huge field of stumps.  
But there's a holy seed in those stumps."

So ends Isaiah 6. And so begins the ministry of Isaiah, an overwhelming ministry motivated by something even more overwhelming, the mercy of a holy God.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (Is 6:9–13). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Now let's talk application. There's much here for us.

Application: What do we learn from Isaiah?

I see four lessons.

1. *God never said it would be easy to serve Him.* We need to talk about this, much more than we do. Especially with people as they start out in the ministry. Like the Lord did with Isaiah. He let him know what was coming—a challenging ministry. He also gave him precisely what he would need to sustain him in that ministry.

First, He brought him face to face with the holiness of God. If you believe in a tiny, man-sized God, you'll bail when the times get tough. The Lord made sure Isaiah knew that He is holy, holy, holy, unrivaled, one of a kind.

And he let him feel the implications, namely, his own sinfulness. *Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips.* If you see yourself as a good person serving other good people, you'll soon become disillusioned when sin confronts you without and within. No, you must be gripped by the truth. He is holy. You are a sinner, and so are those to whom you're called to minister.

That would lead to despair. Were it not for *mercy*. In His mercy, the One who is holy provided a way for the sinner to become holy. Not through good deeds, but through atonement. On the basis of the sacrifice of another, God makes the sinner clean.

And once made clean, the saved sinner now gladly avails himself to the Lord. *Here am I. Send me!*

No, He never said it would be easy to serve Him. Rather, He enables us to do that which is *not* easy, through His mercy.

2. *Not all ministries are created equal!* He calls some to preach, but not all. Some He calls to serve in the factory, or in the hospital, or in the classroom. Not all ministries are the same.

Futhermore, we don't pick our ministries. They're given to us by the One on the throne. Our part is simply to be faithful.

Here's where I find Isaiah so inspirational. Isaiah was called to a very difficult ministry, to preach to a people who would not respond and deliver a message of judgment. Yet the Lord was enough for him, and for sixty years he faithfully fulfilled his assignment.

Friends, if the Lord was enough for Isaiah, isn't He enough for us, as we, in most cases, face our lesser challenges? And if we're wavering, then we need to go back to where Isaiah started. We need to get a fresh glimpse of God's holiness, admit our sinfulness, and be amazed all over by God's incredible mercy and the atonement He provided through Jesus.

3. *God wants us to focus on the **depth** of our ministries and let Him take care of the **breadth** of them.*

We can't produce results, not the kind that exalt God. But that's not to be our focus. Our focus is depth, not breadth. Which is closely connected to our fourth lesson.

4. *When it comes to ministry, the results are up to God.* Isaiah saw very few positive results in his ministry, but he joyfully endured. What kept him going? I want to finish by letting you hear his own testimony, recorded in Isaiah 61:10.

"I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."