

Keep this Spectacular Vision of God before You! Isaiah 6:1-13

The book of Isaiah is a magisterial book about God and His purposes for His people. According to Oswalt¹, chapters 1-5 function to introduce the main themes of the book: Israel has seriously failed God; this results in the inevitability of God's judgment against Israel, yet Isaiah proclaims the promise and hope that one day God will redeem and restore Israel. Chapter 6 not only refers back to these earlier themes, but discloses how God called and commissioned Isaiah to be his spokesman to communicate His message to them. But this is not why this chapter is both so familiar and so important overall to the message of the book and our own walk with God. This chapter is known, remembered, and loved for its **spectacular vision of God**. This vision, or the report of his vision, is the foundational vision of the entire book.² While this is certainly true, the vision also shaped Isaiah's own vision of God and how he approached Him. So the key question then becomes – **what did Isaiah see concerning God?**

So, let us take a closer look at this vision and discover for ourselves what Isaiah saw concerning God (vs.1-5). Then, we will take a look at Isaiah's response to his vision of God (6-7). Finally, we will look at God's call of Isaiah (8-13).

I. Isaiah sees God. This is basic to everything else. God is the center of his vision. How does Isaiah see God? Some might say that this vision concerns and is centered upon the Holiness of God, since this is precisely what the seraphim – God's nearby attendants – seem to focus on and acclaim Him for.³ Yet, a closer and more careful examination of these verses may suggest something different. I maintain that at the core of what Isaiah saw was a spectacular revelation or disclosure of God being **the absolute and supreme ruler and king** over both heaven and earth. This vision of **God's sovereignty is strongly accompanied** by seeing God as both **being holy and glorious!** So I suggest that we should see **three traits of God** that Isaiah wants us to grab hold of and remember from this vision. 1) **God is sovereign.** 2) **God is holy.** 3) **God is glorious or exalted.** Each of these traits is important for us to grasp in order to gain an understanding Isaiah's overall message. Each of these traits will be more fully *described and developed* in subsequent chapters. Each of these traits is only minimally developed here in this vision. Yet, a closer examination of this text, taking care to grasp what Isaiah saw and the meaning of what he saw, will help us to appreciate the message of the book. And grasping Isaiah's vision overall and its principal details **will provide a template** by which we can add further details as the book of Isaiah unfolds them for us.

Basically, I am asserting that the sovereignty of the **LORD** is the key component of his message. This is even more basic and fundamental than seeing God as Holy. How can I say that? It's my interpretation of the text. Let us take a look at the grounding of this interpretation. I see three lines of support for declaring that the center of this vision is an awareness of God's being the supreme ruler/king over all creation. 1) Isaiah draws attention to this trait of God's sovereignty at the beginning and ending of his vision. 2) The vision is dominated by more details that elaborate **God's sovereignty** than the other two traits of God, being holy or glorious. 3) Isaiah refers to Yahweh – the God that he sees – three times in

¹ John Oswalt, **The New International Commentary on the O.T., Isaiah 1-39** pp. 80-81.

² Oswalt remarks "the vision which 6:1-8 report was clearly fundamental to the entire course of Isaiah's ministry and to the shape of his book." p. 176.

³ John Goldingay (**New International Biblical Commentary, Isaiah** p. 58) introduces his comments on this section saying "Yahweh's holiness and the importance of that holiness are of key importance to the chapter."

a way that acknowledges **Yahweh's sovereignty**. So with these thoughts in mind, let us take a closer look at this key chapter.

A. The Kingship of God is Isaiah's focus. This is how he begins this chapter: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne ..." The mention of Uzziah's death helps us anchor this vision at a point in time and in a particular context. Uzziah died sometime between 742-735 B.C. The vision occurred at the death of this King of Judah, who reigned for some 50+ years.⁴ Now, the year of his death marked an end of a period of stability and prosperity. Assyria had an aggressive foreign policy. Assyria now poses a severe threat to Judah and the region. So what is going to happen next? Isaiah sees what is important to see at this crucial turning point: **The LORD reigns!** The LORD is in control of events. Isaiah sees this by communicating this fact that he sees his God-the LORD as lord. It sounds confusing and it is; but please do not miss Isaiah's point. The One he sees is the Lord (Adonay). This is not God's personal name Yahweh, which the God of Israel disclosed first to Moses, then to all of Israel. This is Isaiah's assertion that the one he sees is the King or true king or sovereign of Israel and over Israel. Pay attention to the concluding verse to the main part of what he sees in his vision. He ends his report of what he sees by saying "my eyes have seen the King (MLK) – the LORD (Yahweh) Almighty. I think that Isaiah intentionally draws attention to what he considers the focus of his vision by using two different but synonymous words for a ruler – lord and king – at the very beginning and ending of his vision. God is **the sovereign king**.

B. Royal Setting and details dominate Isaiah's vision. Explicitly and implicitly Isaiah wants us to see the royal context and royal coloring of his vision. The King that he sees is on His throne, in his palace, wearing a royal robe,⁵ in his throne room or court surrounded by his attendants. Now, am I guilty of overstating **this royal perspective**? The unbiased reader would agree about seeing two of the five details, i.e., the throne and the robe, but that is all. Right? No! The 3rd detail, which may be missed, is seeing God in his palace, not just in his temple. The NIV rightly translates the original word that Isaiah uses in verse one as: I saw the LORD and the train or hem of his robe filled the temple. This is right to a point. Isaiah may have been in the temple in Jerusalem, which is also called His house. "The thresholds shook and the house (ESV version; not 'the temple,' NIV) filled with smoke. It is not significant that the NIV translates house as temple and the ESV translates it literally as house. What is important is that the word used in verse one for temple is also translated as palace almost exclusively when the word is used **for the house or home of human ruler**.⁶ What is important to see is that the temple was seen as the house that God dwelled among his people **but also his palace**.⁷ Biblically speaking, when we talk of the ark of God, we should see it as God's throne. While Isaiah does not explicitly mention God being in His courtroom or throne room, this detail of God royal court is mentioned explicitly earlier by Isaiah, when on God's behalf he said, "Who has asked this trampling of my courts" (Is.1:12). This is a reference to one of the courts or halls of a palace.⁸

C. Three times Isaiah refers to the LORD as the Lord. "I saw the Lord seated on the throne..." (vs.1); "I heard the voice of the Lord saying whom shall I send..." (vs. 8); "Then I said how long O Lord?" (vs.11). Granted, Isaiah refers to the **LORD** in this way over the entire chapter, and not just in the core

⁴ Goldingay dates Uzziah's death as occurring sometime between 742 and 735 B.C., p.58.

⁵ The kings of Israel and Judah wore royal robes; so does the true king of both kingdoms. See 1Kings 20:10.

⁶ The same word translated as temple here is translated as palace in 1 Kings 21:1. Context determines the translation.

⁷ Oswalt: the Hebrew word for temple/palace originally comes from the 3rd millennium. It has a strong royal connotation. p. 178.

⁸ See 2 Kings 20:4 "Before..."

vision that he sees. Granted, Isaiah also does refer to the **LORD** three times as being “holy” and thus emphasizing the Holiness of God as he hears the seraphim recognize this trait of God. This is significant. Yet, this reference to the **LORD** *as Lord* is a clear acknowledgment of his sovereignty. This usage by Isaiah is a clear reference to God “being the absolute overlord of the earth with whom all people have to do.”⁹ Taken together with the previously two mentioned references to God being Israel sovereign in this vision, Isaiah is thus making it clear that Yahweh – the **LORD** – is ***Israel’s boss and owner***.

B. Isaiah sees God as Holy. Isaiah certainly was aware that Yahweh – **the LORD** – was Israel’s king and the supreme sovereign over all. In this vision and throughout the book, Isaiah is keenly aware that Yahweh – **the LORD** – is the Holy One as well. This is Isaiah’s distinct title for the **LORD** that he sees. This is the first of the four titles that Isaiah used in chapter one to refer to the **LORD**. Perhaps it is not only his distinctive term, but Isaiah’s favorite term as well, since this title occurs 26 times in the book. According to Goldingay, Isaiah’s description as the Holy One is the fundamental description of God in the book.¹⁰ And according to Goldingay, the entire book works out the implications of seeing God as being the Holy One.¹¹ So if that is the case, **what is being conveyed by describing God as the Holy One?**

According to Biblical scholars, the term has two component meanings. One is a moral component; the other is a metaphysical component. Most of us get the fact that God is absolutely pure. God is absolutely good and righteous. He is not evil. He never does anything wrong. He is fair and just. “He is utterly true.”¹² This is why he expects his people to be holy like Him. This is the basis for Goldingay asserting that “Isaiah makes a point of summarizing God’s call to Israel as ‘Maintain justice and do what is right.’” (Is. 56:1). Why? This is what God is and what God does!

The 2nd element of the meaning of holy in reference to God is a metaphysical one. Don’t be turned off by the sound of this term. It is an accurate and meaningful word by which to describe God’s nature – God’s being – or His essence! This report of the vision of God that he witnessed and heard declaring that God is Holy: this meant that “Isaiah was in the presence of One who is very distinct from and utterly different than himself.”¹³ This includes an awareness of being in the presence of one ethically and absolutely good unlike himself. But much more! What should come to mind when we say that God transcends us and is different from us? Isaiah does not go into detail. From this vision of God and the detailed response to what he sees concerning God, we can perhaps say that Isaiah was aware of being finite, mortal, and human before God who is One who is infinite. Or perhaps it was due to Isaiah catching a glimpse of God in his glory, majesty, and exaltedness which the seraphim also sing about – in their response to seeing and responding to God.

C. God is glorious or exalted! In addition to seeing God’s sovereignty and his holiness, Isaiah is keenly made aware of God’s exalted nature and status. Isaiah sees God’s glory! The seraphim recognize this feature of God in their praise that is directed toward him. “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the **whole earth is full of his glory**. Not only is the whole earth full of his glory, but heaven is too. The seraphim are described as being above Him or perhaps they surround him and his throne like the

⁹ Oswalt, p. 177.

¹⁰ Goldingay, *Isaiah* p. 14.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 7.

¹² Oswalt, p.181.

¹³ Oswalt, p. 181.

cherubim of John's vision of God¹⁴ who continuously worship and praise God. These angelic beings not only recognize that the earth is full of the LORD's glory, but being in the presence of God, they have immediate access to God and behold His glory directly. It is my understanding that this is a major theme of Isaiah's message. One could easily overlook this theme or have it overshadowed and therefore undervalued in light of other themes that Isaiah seeks to impress upon us. What does glory mean? What does Isaiah want us to be aware of when we speak of God being glorious?

Isaiah is indirectly making a profound confession by reporting the angel's declaration that the whole earth is full of his glory. Oswalt defines glory as "an expression **of the stunning importance and reality of God.**"¹⁵ Oswalt captures succinctly what the angels see and what Isaiah sees himself in God's throne room. *God is glorious!* Isaiah sees what the angels see directly about God since they are in his presence. He is One who is characterized by being stunning, extraordinary, majestic, awesome! His sovereignty, his holiness, his power. Everything about God expresses this reality about Him. But how is God's glory related to his holiness?

Goldingay comments that God's "glory is the outward manifestation of Yahweh being holy."¹⁶ This would account for the angel's announcement that even the whole world can see glimpses of God holiness being made evident to them. But Israel in her history was especially privileged to be witnesses to God's glory being present with them and occasionally catching a vivid glimpse of his glory as they encountered God on Mt. Sinai where He displayed something of His great power and holiness by coming down on the mountain with a cloud, **smoke**, fire, lightening, and the **mountain shook**. God tangibly displayed His Presence or glory on that day.¹⁷ Isaiah uses the same imagery in verse 4 to describe not only what happened in response to the singing; is it too much of a stretch for us to see that this is an allusion to two of the several elements that happened when God presence came down on Mt. Sinai? Point: Isaiah is keenly aware **of the awesome stunning reality of God and His status!**

II. Isaiah's response to God followed by God's response to Isaiah's response. (5-7) In verse 5, Isaiah succinctly relates his own response to seeing God in his glory. "*Woe is me! I cried. I am ruined!*" The 1st expression – Woe – is an idiom which signals that some form of disaster is coming. Earlier Isaiah used this expression to announce that God was about to send some disaster to Judah. "Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them." (Is. 3:11) In light of what he sees, Isaiah personally realizes that he is about to face disaster. The 2nd expression "I am ruined," or better translated as **destroyed**.¹⁸ Isaiah realizes that He is done – doomed to die. Why? For two reasons. The first being that he, a mortal, has seen God. "I have seen the King – the LORD Almighty. For God even declared to Moses that" no one may see me and live." (Ex.34 20). But a greater reason for Isaiah expressing doom over his situation at seeing God is the awareness of God's own moral holiness and his own lack of holiness. Isaiah makes this clear by saying: I am ruined, for "*I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.*" Why does Isaiah focus on the lips only? For surely it is not only his words but his actions and Israel actions as well that are unclean? Oswalt comments saying: "Isaiah recognizes with sickening force that his character is not, any more than is his people's, in keeping with God's character. Their lips do not belong to God, else they

¹⁴ Rev. 4:6 "In the center around the throne were four living creatures ..."

¹⁵ Oswalt, p. 181 footnote.

¹⁶ Goldingay, p. 59.

¹⁷ Exodus, 19:16-19.

¹⁸ Isaiah 15:1. The word 'ruined' is translated by NIV here as 'destroyed.'

would continually pour forth praise like the seraphim.”¹⁹ Isaiah lips express his heart. It does not belong to God. Thus he is painfully aware that he is unclean. So what can he do? Not much! *But God can do something for Isaiah!*

God forgives Isaiah. God makes him totally clean. God removes his guilt. “Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken 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.’” This symbolic act of cleansing pictures concretely, yet symbolically, Isaiah’s sin being purged away by a fiery coal from God’s altar touching his lips. By this symbolic act, Isaiah is forgiven of his wrong doing and made right with God. How the fiery coal achieves this atonement and forgiveness is not important. What is important for us to see is that God takes the initiative to make things right between Himself and Isaiah. God through his angel approaches Isaiah in order to cleanse him and make Isaiah righteous! As a result Isaiah is no longer doomed to die, but can enjoy being in the Presence of God. This is God’s mercy! This foreshadows what God accomplished for humanity by sending Christ into this world in order that by his death we could be forgiven of our sin before a righteous God.

III. Isaiah accepts a difficult and a depressing assignment from God. (vs. 8-13) Beginning with verse 8, Isaiah concludes the account of his experience of “Seeing God” with a brief account of how God called him to serve him as his prophet. These six verses conclude Isaiah’s account of his vision of God by presenting the difficult task that God gave Isaiah and depressing outcome for Isaiah’s ministry. Isaiah concludes his account by making three points for us to see. 1) Isaiah accepted God’s call for ministry. 2) God indirectly but not directly, closed his people’s hearts to hear and respond to Isaiah’s preaching. 3) Isaiah was not coldly delivering God’s message, but strongly grieved over the projected outcome to his preaching.

A. Isaiah accepted God’s call to ministry. Isaiah begins this section describing his own call to be God’s spokesperson or prophet. “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us?” (vs. 8) This is not what it appears to be! Isaiah is not volunteering for the job! For no prophet chooses to be a prophet on their own initiative. Isaiah did not dream of being a prophet. The pattern of Scripture is that God calls a person to this office or task. The person then has to be willing to accept the call. This was the pattern for Moses, Ezekiel, Amos, and Jeremiah. I find it difficult to believe it was different for Isaiah. God called Isaiah. Isaiah in turn accepted the call.

B. God indirectly but not directly closed the people of Judah’s hearts. (vs.9-10) God gave Isaiah the assignment of closing the hearts and minds of the people. Verse 9 directs us to see these next two verses as being God’s instructions-God plan concerning what Isaiah should tell or communicate to the people on God’s behalf. “Go and tell this people” This is pretty straight forward. But the next 1 and ½ verses appear to be very disturbing, for they present a troubling picture of Isaiah’s assignment. Was Isaiah called to deliberately close the minds and hearts of the people through his preaching? That is what it appears that these verses are saying? Or is it perhaps better to see these verses as declaring the unsuccessful outcome as a result of Isaiah preaching. For God tells Isaiah from the beginning that Isaiah ministry would not be successful. People would fail to listen to his messages. People would fail to grasp the message and turn or repent and be healed! (vs 10) How sad? Why? What happened?

¹⁹ Oswalt, p.183.

It appears from a careful reading of Isaiah chapters 1-5 that Isaiah in his ministry to Judah did expose the people to their sin and to the consequences due to their sin. Isaiah disclosed that God was and would continue to punish the people for their sin and guilt. Isaiah called people to repent and be forgiven by God.²⁰ So Isaiah was faithful to his calling. But Isaiah's preaching was met with closed hearts and minds. The people were not willing to repent. They even treated Isaiah and God with contempt by declaring that Isaiah's God should hurry up and bring his plan (judgment) to pass so that they could experience it. (Is. 5:19) So these verses of Isaiah (9-10) disclose God's intention to close the people's hearts and minds to hear and be receptive to Isaiah's message. Did God close their minds and hearts? Yes! But it was only in response to the people having closed their minds first.²¹

C. Isaiah strongly grieved over the projected outcome resulting from his ministry. (11-13)

Isaiah's grief is not explicitly stated. Yet this is Oswalt's interpretation of these verses. How long O Lord? The question to ask is how long for what? Isaiah seems to be directed to the ultimate objective and the results stemming from Isaiah's preaching and ministry. Isaiah realizes that his audience would not repent. But how long would this last? How long would it be before they do and how long before God forgives them and restores them? Not until all their cities were ruined and the land made into a wasteland. This is devastating news! But it is not without some hope. Israel will be renewed and restored. For Isaiah compares Israel to an oak tree that has been cut down and destroyed. Yet this is not the end. For Isaiah declares that out of the stump that remains a holy seed will sprout again. Point: God is not finished with Israel his people.

²⁰ See chapter one especially.

²¹ So Goldingay, p.61.