

09.01.2021 CRISIS OF LEADERSHIP

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Isaiah 6:1

Our lesson describes two men who experienced a crisis of leadership – King Uzziah and the prophet Isaiah. Anyone who has been appointed to any position of leadership in the church (spiritual Israel) would do well to learn from their experience. Underpinning the entire passage for study is the fact that all human leadership must be subject to the will of the sovereign Lord, Ruler of heaven and earth.

The King is Dead. Long Live the King!

King Uzziah was probably the greatest king after King David and King Solomon. He depended on God and God helped him mightily – 2 Chronicles 26. Unfortunately, as his power increased, so did his pride. This led him to the presumptuous sin of entering the Temple and taking upon himself the duties of the priests, the sons of Aaron (forbidden to all others in Israel, including kings). God struck him with leprosy and his son Jotham ruled for a few years as regent till Uzziah died.

Reflections from King Uzziah's life and reign:

1. If you are in a position of leadership, as a leader do you reflect the holiness and righteousness of the Sovereign Leader of the Universe, who has appointed you to the position you are in?
2. Do you humble yourself before God (as the seraphim in Isaiah 6:2) and acknowledge His holiness and glory?
3. Or, like King Uzziah, is your heart lifted up in pride (2 Chronicles 26:15, 16) and do you rebel against God, by having a spirit and mind contrary to the character of God?
4. Uzziah's life reminds us that we need to remain humble and faithful moment by moment, day by day. He was a successful king, but chose to go his own way just once, with terrible consequences.

It was an uncertain time in Israel and in the kingdom of Judah. The Assyrians were at their doorstep seeking to destroy them. But worse was the spiritual state of the kingdom, which we studied last week.

Isaiah was a young prophet who may have felt overwhelmed by the task before him. In these circumstances, he is granted a vision of the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, the Lord. An earthly king may be dead, but God still is the sovereign Lord.

“Holy, Holy, Holy”: Isaiah 6:1-4

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

God, the sovereign Lord, is always on His throne, no matter what the state of politics or the spiritual state of the church is. He is in control.

The Lord was seated on His throne, high and lifted up, “and the train of his robe filled the temple.” God sits upon His throne and His royal robes completely fill the Temple. There was no space in the throne room for another. Not only is God sovereign, He alone is sovereign.

The seraphim cover their faces and feet – a sign of humility before God their Creator. And one seraph sings to the other, *“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts”* gets the reply, *“the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

Glory is the manifestation of God’s holiness.

Holiness is a significant theme in Isaiah’s prophecies. One of Isaiah’s favourite phrases for God is “the holy One of Israel,” which occurs 25 times in his book. It is also significant that ‘Holy’ is repeated three times. In Hebrew poetry, this meant that it was of superlative importance.

The Hebrew word for “holy” literally means “to set apart,” “to make distinct,” or “to put at a distance from.” It speaks of separateness. God is holy because He is entirely separate from His creation. He is distinct, one of a kind. There is nothing in all of creation that equals God. Even the seraphim, who were sinless creatures, covered their faces and their feet in the face of God’s holiness. Even they ascribed to God a holiness that did not belong to them. It is a mistake to equate holiness with moral purity. Moral purity is part of, but not the whole, of holiness.

New Personality: Isaiah 6:5-7

So I said: “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 my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged (atoned for).”

Faced with a vision of God’s holiness, Isaiah recognises the depths of his unholiness. He is led to humility; to humble himself before God.

We never get a true assessment of ourselves when we compare ourselves to other human beings, who are fellow sinners. It is *‘seeing the King, the Lord of hosts’* that gives us a true idea of our sinfulness.

Fire from the altar touches Isaiah’s lips and his sin is atoned for. The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin when we accept Christ and begin our spiritual journey with God. But fire refines and removes all traces of earthliness from us; it is often a painful process, but we can trust the Refiner. Christ Himself *‘will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness.’* Malachi 3:3

Why Isaiah’s lips? He was appointed to be a prophet. He had the ministry of the word. Therefore his words and message needed to be pure words; words that were inspired by God and which did not arise from his own thinking.

‘Without a doubt, Isaiah was one of the most righteous and holy men in all of Judah, for the prophets were generally known for their piety and devotion to our Creator. Consequently, one might expect Isaiah to be confident in the presence of God and for the Lord to praise His servant for His goodness. Yet that is not what happened when Isaiah met Yahweh. Confronted with a vision of God on His throne, Isaiah could only proclaim an oracle of woe upon himself (v. 5). An oracle of woe was the worst prophecy that could be given of a nation or an individual, and here Isaiah applies it to himself for his uncleanness (v. 5). As holy as Isaiah might have been in comparison to the other Israelites in his day, he was absolutely filthy in comparison to the Lord God Almighty.

The Lord does not respond to Isaiah’s woe by telling him that he really was not that bad or that he was being melodramatic. Instead, God atones for the prophet’s sin (vv. 6–7). That is the only way any sinner can survive in the presence of the most holy Creator. This is true even for those who have not sinned heinously. Isaiah was not a murderer or adulterer. He was not guilty of idolatry. He only possessed “unclean lips,” which from a human perspective does not seem all that bad. That is especially true in the coarse and vulgar culture of our own day. But Isaiah knew that the standard creatures must meet to be righteous before God is perfection. Even one slip of the tongue was enough to require atonement.’ *RC Sproul*

Royal Commission: Isaiah 6:8

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah's vision of God led him to a true estimate of himself; one that was true to the Biblical estimate of man... 'We are all as an unclean thing...' And when he recognised this, God was able to use him and commission him.

Isaiah became eager and willing to do God's will and serve Him. He was obedient to the heavenly vision. He was filled with boldness to preach an unpleasant message to Judah and her kings.

Appalling Message to the People: Isaiah 6:9, 10

And He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' "Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed."

God's word to Isaiah was that he would experience opposition and would be used as God's instrument of judgement. It was not an easy message to deliver.

Why such a harsh message? The first 5 chapters of Isaiah give us the context. Despite God doing all that He could for His people, they had rebelled against Him and become spiritually unfaithful, but continued to offer Him the outward forms of worship (hypocrisy). They had become perverters of possessions, pleasures, reverence, values, wisdom and justice.

When God reveals Himself to His people and they refuse to see, hear and understand His revelation of Himself, their sinful condition and their need of His cleansing, they become spiritually blind, deaf and dull of heart.

God's supreme revelation of Himself is Christ Jesus. When He came to earth, His own people rejected Him. Christ quoted this passage from Isaiah to them (Matthew 13:14-15; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:10). John quoted this passage in describing the unbelief of the Jews even after the raising of Lazarus (John 12:39-41). Paul reminded the Jews of Rome of this passage when they rejected the gospel (Acts 28:26, 27). He quoted this passage in Romans 11:8 when describing the Israelites' rejection of God's grace.

What about spiritual Israel, the church? Can the church be guilty of the sins of Israel...Can she be guilty of 'being wise in her own eyes, and prudent in her own sight?'

In His message to Laodicea, Jesus says, *"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked— I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent."* Revelation 3:17-19

The Promise of the Holy Seed

"But yet a tenth will be in it, and will return and be for consuming, as a terebinth tree or as an oak, whose stump remains when it is cut down. So the holy seed shall be its stump." Isaiah 6:13

Because of their refusal to give God their sole devotion (He alone is sovereign), the Lord would bring judgment upon the people and the land (Isaiah 6:12).

If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself. 2 Timothy 2:12, 13

Yet, despite His people's unfaithfulness, God will remain faithful to His covenant people. There will be a holy seed, a faithful remnant, and above all, there will arise the holy Seed of the woman, Messiah. Through Messiah, mankind will once more be restored to holiness as they accept Christ's redeeming work in their lives.

The chapter which begins with God's holiness manifested in His sanctuary ends with the promise of a holy seed (remnant) on earth. This holy remnant is a people who recognise the holiness of God and know that He will not share His glory; therefore, they live in humility before Him and are totally devoted to Him.

Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. Romans 11:5

Conclusion:

This is a lesson that should cause us to *'put our shoes off our feet, for the place we are standing on is holy ground'*. Who can even attempt to discuss or fathom the holiness of God? It is only the Holy Spirit who can enlighten us of the mystery and majesty of God in His holiness. And the Spirit will only dwell with those who have a humble and contrite spirit, and teach them of the secret things of God.

Our greatest failing as individuals and the church, the Body of Christ, is our failure to understand who God is and what His character is like. God is NOT human. He is God and therefore, there is an infinite gap between us and God. We cannot bridge this gap. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways, our ways. *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8, 9).*

If the gap is to be bridged, it must be from God's side, for God is holy. To be holy means 'set apart'. God is set apart *from* the power, the practice and the presence of sin. He is set apart *to* absolute righteousness and goodness. There is no sin in God, and God can have nothing to do with sin. If we are to approach God, we can only do so on God's terms. We must be made holy – for He is holy. Any holiness that falls short of God's holiness will not be able to stand in the presence of God.

The good news of the gospel is that Christ came into the world to save us *from* our sin, to set us apart from sin forever by the sacrifice of Himself (Hebrews 10:10, 12-14).

Whenever the church does not represent God in His holiness correctly, it has a detrimental effect both on the church as well as society, for we are called to be salt and light to a world that lives in enmity against God.

For Reflection:

Have we had a personal vision of God? Have we beheld His glory and His holiness seen in His Son Christ Jesus (John 1:14)?

We are very comfortable with God's love. We love to sing of His love, His grace, His goodness and mercy. How would our lives change if we sang and meditated continually instead, on His holiness?

Do I recognise that because God is love and God is holy, He demonstrated His holiness by sacrificing His son for the sin of the world?

Do I recognise that Calvary is not only the story of God's love and justice; it is above all the story of His holiness?

For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" Isaiah 57:15.