

Night Vision

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Isaiah 6:1-8

June 8, 2014

Father, I pray that the cross that's hanging behind me would now be front and center in our vision, so that we would see Jesus. May the reality of the gospel be so clear that we would be transformed by it. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

They're called night stalkers, this U.S. Special Forces team. They train by day and battle by night. Like Abraham of old, who performed evening reconnaissance to rescue his nephew, Lot, they operate under the cover of darkness. With the aid of night vision optics, they enjoy a significant advantage.

However, even with state of the art equipment, such combat is difficult. Reduced visibility promotes fear of the unknown. Soldiers under fire can't tell from where an attack originates, so confusion and disorientation are typical. Such uncertainty is associated with feelings of helplessness and loneliness, and it creates a tendency to overestimate enemy strength and be excessively pessimistic about the prospect of success.

"The key to victory," says one seasoned soldier, "is to acquire vision that clarifies your mission's objective, while at the same time minimizing distractions. This work," he concludes, "is all about vision." What a remarkable illustration! We who are children of light and children of the day do not belong to the night or to the darkness, as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5. Following the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, we step into the shadows, strategically engaging the darkness in pursuit of God's mission i.e., "*to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10).

This mission to which we're called, however, requires particular vision—a certain sight, without which we, too, are inevitably confused, distracted and disoriented. We are naturally led to ask the question, "Of what does this Christian vision consist? What does it mean to see the living God?" That is the question today, and, for the answer, please turn in your Bibles to Isaiah 6, beginning in verse one.

A Light in the Darkness

Isaiah 6:1-8 begins, "*In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord...*" Let's pause a moment to realize that the death of Uzziah was a watershed moment in the history of Israel. During his 52 years as king, the nation enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. Overall, she was faithful to Yahweh. However,

when Uzziah died, something changed. The leadership of Israel turned their backs on God. With the light of God's presence behind them, they proceeded to walk in the darkness of their own shadows. It was there in that shadow of rebellion and sin that life fell apart socially, politically, economically and, most of all, spiritually.

This was the setting into which Isaiah was called to shine the light of the Lord into the darkness of Judah. It was fearful. It was intimidating. It was a daunting call that was much bigger than Isaiah. Therefore, God gave the prophet a three dimensional vision, which led him to lift his eyes above the horizon of his fear and intimidation and to recognize the majesty of God. He provided Isaiah with the requisite courage and faith to step into the darkness of his day. It is this very same vision that we need if we are to engage the darkness of our world with courage and fidelity.

Confronted with the Holiness of God

Let's continue reading in verse one:

... I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² 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. ³ And one called to another and said:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"*

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

These four verses are like a canvas on which the prophet laid down brush strokes to portray what God is like in His majesty. We see that he began with God's robe. It was the case in the ancient world that the authority and power of a king was often measured by his robe. If you were, perhaps, the king of a small nation, you would be found wearing a relatively modest robe. If, on the other hand, you were the king of Tyre or Sidon or maybe Solomon during the height of Israel's kingdom, you would have a robe that was exceedingly long and intricately designed.

Please notice what it says here about the Lord's robe. It doesn't simply extend to His feet or cover the throne on which He was seated, but it is said to extend out and fill the entire temple. It also helps to understand something of the temple. In the ancient world, they were often viewed as miniature models of the universe. Maybe you've visited a church at some point that is having a building project, and in the narthex or vestibule was a model of that church. That was the way in which a temple would function in the minds of ancient people.

Take, for instance, Israel's temple. There were three precincts:

- First, there was a courtyard, the place where you stood as a faithful man or woman, raising hands in worship of God.
- Second, there was the Holy Place, a place you could see, but you couldn't go there unless you were a priest.
- The third place was the Holy of Holies, an inner sanctum where God dwelled. It was a place you couldn't even see, because a thick, dark curtain separated it from the outside world.

These three precincts were thought to correspond to the three dimensions of the universe. You have the earth, the place where men and women raise their hands in worship of God. Then you have the sky, a place you could see but, in a day before airplanes, could not access. Finally, the spiritual realm was the place where God and the angels abided.

With that background, think with me for a moment what it meant when Isaiah said that the train of God's robe, representing God's power and authority, filled the temple, representing the universe. My friends, there's no place in all of creation over which God fails to exercise divine sovereignty. He reigns and He reigns over everything. It's not just in church gatherings, mind you. Sometimes we can unwittingly think that, when we're here singing and doing our thing, God is sovereignly orchestrating this. However, He sovereignly orchestrates every day of the week, wherever we find ourselves.

It's noteworthy that the trailing of God's royal robe filled the temple from the innermost sanctum to the outermost walls. Hence, for God, there is no dividing line between sacred and secular. There's no part of life that is exempt from His presence.

We continue to see this vision and notice these angels were all around God singing. It says of them that they have three sets of wings:

- With the first, they cover their face, right? Presumably, the light emanating from God is so intensely bright that they can't look directly upon it.
- With the second set of wings, they cover their feet, which is probably an expression of humility and modesty. They are the creatures in the presence of the one true Creator.
- With the third set, they fly, always ready to go forth in service of this great God.

I imagine them lined up on each side of the throne room singing back and forth in antiphonal fashion, "Holy! Holy! Holy!" Their voices build in crescendo, and, as they do, the doorposts begin to tremble and the walls begin to shake. Even inanimate objects, like doorposts and thresholds, have enough sense to quiver in the presence of this holy God.

What do you suppose this would have meant to Isaiah, recognizing the unfathomable extent of God's majesty? Can you imagine what this would have done for his faith, how this would have helped him lift his gaze above his fears and see there's something far greater than anything he faces in this world?

What does this mean to us, as we reflect on the reality of God in our fears, our disillusionment and our despair?

My friends, I am here to tell you that the robe of God's majesty—His power and His authority—covers every circumstance of life. There is no situation that escapes His sovereign oversight. In the words of our text, "*the whole earth is full of his glory!*"

Notice the effect this had upon Isaiah. Verse five says, "*And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for 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!'*"

Confronted with God's holiness, Isaiah was crushed. He was smitten and broken. He said, "*Woe is me!*" This is a way of invoking a curse upon yourself. Where I come from in Long Island, the Yiddish translation of this word is "Oi vey!" It is like saying in our language, "I now want to crawl in a little hole and die." Why was this? According to Isaiah, it was because of his lips—his unclean lips.

This may sound strange at first, but we must realize that, in Scripture, the lips function as a barometer to indicate the condition of one's heart. Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34; Luke 6:45), and one day we will give an account for every word that we speak (Romans 14:10-12). This is a problem that applies not only to Isaiah but to all men and women as we live amongst a people of unclean lips. This was a way for Isaiah to recognize his sin. He was guilty and stood before a holy God, condemned on account of his imperfection and rebellion.

Finally, Isaiah said, "*For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!*" It was a common belief in Isaiah's day that to look directly upon God meant you would die. Even Moses, the great friend of God, when he asked to see God's glory was only permitted to see the afterglow. Remember Exodus 34? God passed by and said, "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...*" and Moses looked upon the back of God.

Isaiah saw God full on and had every reason to believe that, in the face of this beatific vision, he would die. This vision, mind you, humbled Moses. It causes Daniel to fall down prostrate (Daniel 10:15-17). It blinded Saul (Acts 9). It threw John upon his face (Revelation 1:17). Here it brings Isaiah to the brink of death.

In the West, the modern tendency is to say that our greatest need is for more self-reliance or self-confidence. Here we see, however, that our greatest need is, in fact, self-abasement—the recognition of our insufficiency. It is neither necessary nor helpful to be morbidly introspective but we cannot afford to let ourselves off lightly. Like Isaiah, from whom there was not even a hint of self-vindication, we must be honest with God about our brokenness and sin, appealing to Him in genuine repentance.

It is, if you will, the wheat principle. In John 12:44, Jesus said, *“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.”* Let me ask, if I may, how is God crushing you this day? In this season of life, how are you realizing brokenness?

It has been said:

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;

When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How he ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him

Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!

How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And which every purpose fuses him;

By every act induces him
To try His splendor out-
God knows what He’s about.

(Anonymous)

The Atonement for Sin

Thankfully, God did not leave Isaiah in a state of misery and brokenness, languishing in the darkness of death. Verse six says, *“Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.’”*

Please notice who took the initiative. It was not Isaiah somehow getting his act together and making himself presentable to God, making it all right with the Divine. It was, rather, God by divine initiative Who went to Isaiah by a means of an angel carrying the coal with tongs. Also notice where the angel placed the coal: on Isaiah’s lips. They were the very point of Isaiah’s need, brokenness, shame and guilt. With the application of that burning hot coal, Isaiah’s guilt was removed. His sin was atoned for. Oh, how ready and willing is God to extend forgiveness!

However, don’t you wonder why the seraph flew with a coal? Why did he not impart blood, since blood is the only true solvent for sin? It’s important for us to recognize that the glowing coal was taken from the smoking altar. This altar of sacrifice on which blood had been spilled.

Later in his book, Isaiah described the reality to which this blood-drenched, burning coal points. In Isaiah 53, he wrote of God’s Suffering Servant, saying:

⁴ *Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows. ...*

⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions;*

*he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.*

This, my friends, was the bleeding sacrifice that purchased our redemption. In hindsight of the New Testament, we precisely recognize how this was achieved and the particular form that it took. Jesus Christ received in His hands and feet spikes of divine judgment, and, after three days of death, He rose from the grave so that we, condemned as children of darkness, might be embraced as children of light.

This is the good news. In light of this gospel, life is altogether different.

Our life is like the dial of a clock,
The hands are God's hands passing over us
The short hand is the Hand of his chastening,
The long, his Hand of Mercy

Slowly and surely the hand of chastening must pass,
And at each stroke God speaks His word of grace,
But the hand of mercy moves constantly
With blessing sixty-fold God covers each moment

Both hands are firmly fastened to the central pivot.
Which is called the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(Anonymous)

This, my friends, is where we live. In Christ, this is where we live our lives, and so it was for Isaiah. However, where did this leave him and where did this send him in his ministry?

Responding to God's Call

In verse eight, Isaiah said, *"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'"*

This is what we refer to as a "call narrative." It was a particular place in time when God called a prophet to service, but it was unlike most other call narratives. Usually, God would go to an individual, such as in the burning bush (Exodus 3), get his or her attention and seeing, rather directly, what God intended for that person to do. In this case, however, there was no such direct communication. Instead, there was a question that was left hovering in the air and then it was up to Isaiah to respond.

I would suggest that Isaiah's response here was the only reasonable response he could have uttered. Just a moment ago, Isaiah was as good as dead. He was on his face before God, with no hope, no life and nothing but guilt. However, God in His grace removed that guilt, gave Isaiah life and then gave him a calling. In light of that, what could Isaiah have possibly said except for what he said? "Here am I.

I belong to You. My life—all that I am and all that I have—is consecrated unto You. So here am I. Send me.”

Is it any different for us? We who are dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1)? We who are far off, as strangers and aliens to the covenant of promise (1 Peter 2:10-12)? We who are without God and without hope in this world (Ephesians 2:12), having been brought near from that place, made children of God and given the Spirit to indwell us? Is it any different? What can we possibly say except the same?

“Lord, here am I. Send me. Send me wherever You would have me to go and do whatever You would have me do.” We are not just saved by the gospel; we are saved for the gospel. In living for the gospel, we realize the purpose for which you and I are called. So it was for Isaiah.

What long-term impact would this have had on the prophet? He went on from this point—this amazing event where he caught a vision of God—to face fear, hardship and even moments of despair, but he was never alone. Isaiah possessed the requisite vision, facing his fears with courage and faith.

Friends, so do we. On this Pentecost Sunday, we who are in Christ sit here indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He is the One Who illuminates God’s majesty, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He convicts us of sin, breaking us of our self-will and pride. However, He does not leave us broken. He does not leave us there to wither and die by ourselves. He applies redemption so that, like the dead kernel of wheat that sprouts and blossoms with life, we are made new creatures in Christ.

Finally, He empowers us for witness, to pursue something greater than ourselves and something eternal. That is, to embody and proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. He does all of this with the vision that He has given us in His Son. So as we step into this week, may we be men and women who behold this vision and, in doing so like Isaiah, say, “Here am I. Send me.”

Let us pray.

Dear God, we thank You that You do not leave us to die in our sin and shame. Instead, You come to us in Your grace, lifting us out of the miry clay and putting our feet upon a rock. As if that were not enough, You commission us to represent You in this world. Lord, we are weak, needy and desperate, but we rejoice in the fact that You are our God and You empower us as only You can do. Toward that end, we look in faith, praying that Christ would be exalted. In His name we pray. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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