

The Call of Isaiah

by Vance Havner

The sermon emphasizes the importance of contemplation, faithfulness, and obedience in the ministry, and the need for preachers to be bold and not afraid of mortal men.

Duration: 22:34

Scripture: Genesis 22:1

Topics: "Isaiah"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on his calling to preach the word of God and emphasizes the importance of doing God's work well. He mentions that the length of time or the rewards received are not important, but rather the satisfaction of hearing God say 'well done' at the end. The preacher also discusses the need for cleansing and refers to Isaiah's confession of having unclean lips, highlighting the significance of our speech in revealing the condition of our hearts. He concludes by encouraging young preachers to trust in God's faithfulness and not worry about the practicalities or rewards of their ministry, but rather to respond to God's call with a willing heart.

Transcript

He was stunned, but for him there was something extra, I saw also the Lord, and it was that plus that made the difference. Everybody else saw the disaster, the disillusionment, the despair that gripped the country. Isaiah felt that too, but he saw also the Lord, and so what was a minus for everybody else brought him a plus.

So in the New Testament we see not yet all things but under him, that's minus, but we see Jesus, that's the great plus. Isaiah's vision began in a crisis, and that crisis brought contemplation. He wasn't galloping from Dan to Beersheba, he was in the temple, the place of prayer, of meditation, of reverence, and of worship.

Contemplation is a lost art in the ministry today. Isaiah was already a prophet, he was in full-time service, he was in the business. In the first five chapters of the book he pronounced woes in all directions, woe is this and woe is that, but finally he got around to woe is me.

He's not the only man who met God in a new way when he was already a devoted servant. Joshua did it, Job did it, John did it. I was much blessed years ago by a book, The Deeper Experiences of Famous Christians, and most of these, of whom I read, were already doing well by ordinary standards.

The average preacher would be glad to settle for what they already had. There's a danger of trafficking an unfelt truth. We can work in the bakery till we lose our taste for the bread.

Old Richard Baxter said, Many a tailor goes in rags who maketh costly clothes for others, and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes. It took a national disaster to send Isaiah into silence, and Uzziah may have to die before some of us can say, I saw also the Lord. The death of Uzziah was a minus for everybody else, but it brought out the plus for Isaiah.

Contemplation was followed by conviction and confrontation. Woe is me, here am I. Those are landmarks in the life of this prophet. We're trying to get a lot of people today to say, Here am I, before they've ever said, Woe is me.

Job said, I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore, I abhor myself and repent in death and ashes. When Isaiah saw the land in its sinfulness, it was because he first saw the Lord in his holiness and himself in his own wickedness.

The sense of God brought a sense of sin. We never realize how unclean we are as persons or as a people until we've seen the Lord. Isaiah said, I'm a man of unclean lips.

I dwell among people of unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. There's a growing tendency today to excuse the evils of this generation and gloss over its rottenness and minimize its corruption, to spread cold cream on the cancers of iniquity and dust off sin with a powder puff. Isaiah was under no illusions about his generation.

In the first chapter of the book, he calls them rulers of Sodom, people of Gomorrah. He declares God scorn of their religious ritual without reality, and his hatred of formalistic worship. One doesn't have to be an Elijah under the juniper, admitting that he's the surviving saint, all the good people are going to accept me and I'm not feeling so well myself.

God has his 7,000 who haven't bowed to Baal, and Isaiah called them God's remnant, but there's no use beating around the bush. The carcasses are waiting to vulture today, and civilization is in a bad way. Read the magazines, look at the TV programs set on a jet like a bird in the wilderness waiting to be fed until all the potential alcoholics have had theirs first.

Consider the nudity, the pornography, the homosexuality, the drug traffic, the anarchy, the breakdown of home and marriage, the desecration of the Lord's day, the immodesty in dress and behavior, the demonic criminals in the lenient courts. It's a sad day, and toleration of vulgarity and obscenity and blasphemy has become common even among God's people. We have to listen to the filthy conversation of this age, and sometimes one feels like saying to some of them, do you expect to eat supper with a mouth like that? Words that were outlawed a few years ago are now accepted by the public without the lifting of an eyebrow.

Any Isaiah today who can see all this without an inner and an outer protest has not had a vision of a holy God lately. We dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Lucille Ball said recently that she was shocked because she's not shocked at conditions, and Gloria Swanson, movie star of years ago, said recently, the violence and cruelty and despair of American movies in recent years makes me mentally and emotionally sick.

We certainly need a cleansing, and Isaiah said I'm a man of unclean lips. Now, why didn't he say I'm a man of unclean heart? And I dwell among a people of unclean heart. Why did he say lips? Because out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh.

The Bible has a lot to say about the mouth, the lips, the tongue, for our speech betrays us. What's down in the well comes up in the bucket. I remember the old country doctor of my boyhood days.

No matter what ailment you might have, anything from headache to fallen arches, he started his examination by saying, let me see your tongue. That's a good way to examine a Christian today. Dr. R.G. Lee says the worst monster in the world has his den right back of our teeth.

Proverbs 21, 23 says, Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue keepeth his soul from trouble. And we read, He that will love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil in his lips, that they speak no guile. My Lord said, By thy words thou shalt be justified and condemned.

James devotes a whole chapter to the subject. Isaiah needed his lips touched with fire if he was to be God's spokesman. Whoever speaks for God must have an anointed mouth.

It's not a pleasant experience. There's nothing delightful and ecstatic about a red hot coal on anybody's lips. It's not a relaxing experience.

When God operates, he never uses an anesthetic. He doesn't make saints of us in our sleep. The deeper Christian life's not a tranquilizer's pill.

It's a serious vocation, not a sanctified vacation. We need our lips touched with coals from the altar for two reasons. Because of the things we're saying that we shouldn't say, gossiping, tackling, backbiting, reviling, whisperings, swellings, tumults, and then the things we're not saying that we should say.

We keep silent in an evil time. It's a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace. We fear to wound his toes and blush to speak his name.

We're his witnesses, but we're like arctic rivers frozen at the mouth. Christianity has lost its voice. It needs the string of its tongue loose.

We need some voice lessons. Christian experience is vocal, it's articulate. Repentance begins with words.

Take with you words and turn to the Lord and say unto him, take away all iniquity and receive us graciously. So will we render the cares of our lips. So spoke Hosea.

Faith is vocal. If we confess with the mouth, the Lord Jesus, with the heart man believeth under righteousness and with the mouth confession is made into salvation. Praise is vocal.

By him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. Testimony is vocal. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.

If we've been saying what we shouldn't say or not saying what we should say, we have voice trouble and back of that heart trouble lies for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. The only way to a vital and vocal victorious faith is by confession and by cleansing. We need our lips touched with the coal from the altar.

There came then the coal, whom shall I send and who will go? Divine sovereignty and human responsibility and Isaiah's response, here am I, send me and the commission go. The coal and the commission did not come until after the confession and the cleansing. The go followed the woe.

It began with a crisis, the death of Uzziah, Isaiah seeing the Lord. His decision to serve God as a witness and a prophet was no run-of-the-mill choice. He didn't look over several professions and decided to enter the ministry.

Bishop Kilgo says of Henry Clay Morrison, he became a preacher because God called him. It was not an interest in human welfare, a desire to serve, a decision for life service or any of the dainty little purposes proclaimed and urged in these days of the youthful minds. Isaiah was told to preach and told at the same time that his listeners would not accept his message and God told Ezekiel, they'll listen to you but they won't do what you say.

And Paul told Timothy to preach the word but immediately told him that the day would come when they wouldn't endure sound doctrine. We live in the last days and all prospective preachers ought to understand what they're getting into. There's a lot of hand-wringing because fewer young men are entering the ministry, all kinds of reasons are being offered for this decline.

Some of them amuse me and some amaze me. We're told that preachers are underpaid and retirement benefits are inadequate and churches mistreat preachers and the word gets around and we hear that other professions are taking over many of the functions of the preacher and no longer does he have the peculiar position he once enjoyed in the community. We read that people don't believe the Bible as they once did and getting saved isn't the urgent business that it used to be.

Ah, but there was a time when the call to preach settled it in spite of all the complaints. When God said go, a man didn't sit down with a pad and a pencil to figure out the incidentals. When the divine summons rang out, whom shall I send, a man didn't ask what income bracket will this put me in, what about my retirement benefits, will I be appreciated for what I'm worth.

All he could say was here am I, send me. There was one Bible character with his pad and pencil ready. Peter asked what shall we have therefore if we follow thee.

Somebody has called Peter the most American of all the disciples. It says he said not knowing what he said and he often did just that. He anticipates us for centuries.

He got cured the hard way and sounds more like a preacher when later on he said silver and gold have I none but such as I have, give I thee. He'd gotten around from what do I get to what can I give and until a preacher makes that change he's never able effectively in the name of Jesus to bid this crippled world rise and walk. Notice how personal this was, whom shall I send, here am I, two I's there, whom shall I send, send me, two sends there.

A preacher of God doesn't merely make up his mind to go, he consents to being sent. It's teamwork, God and man, sovereignty and responsibility. You remember that when Absalom was slain, Hebeaz wanted to run on and bear tidings but he didn't have anything to say when he got where he was going.

All he had was a tumult. Alas, too many have run too soon these days and have nothing but a tumult in their minds and in their hearts. There's a glorious independence about being a man of God.

Amos said, I was not a prophet, that is, I'm not a prophet by profession, nor the son of a prophet by parentage, I'm a prophet by providence. The Lord took me. I've heard that John McNeill, the Scottish preacher, had some difficulties once with a church where he was serving.

The next Sunday he arose and said, God and John McNeill have come to an understanding. Keep your hands off John McNeill. We need a preacher's lid today to free the ministry and unshackle the pulpit.

Paul called himself an ambassador in bonds. The only stocks and bonds he knew anything about were for his feet, for his wrists, and he was often in prison, but stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage. Today we often are bound with stocks and bonds of our own forging, and we need to stand fast in liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

There was a time when the minister was the oracle of God in the community. He's been superseded by experts and professionals and counselors and psychologists until he's just among those present. Just another Joe at the Civic Club luncheon, just another John Doe in the back seat of a carpool on the way to work.

When the old giants of God died, they said they're gone but not forgotten, but the trouble with us preachers today is we're too often forgotten but not gone. Great preaching's been downgraded, even by religious leaders who advocate a new style of conversational pulpit talk instead of old-fashioned preaching. We hear that the preacher and the pulpit are being moved from the center of the platform to the wings, and that his chief business is just to be the equipper of the layman, according to Ephesians 4.11.12. When God calls a man to preach, he calls him to a pulpit, not to a desk.

He's not supposed to be the head of a department store. God calls preachers to preach, and the devil doesn't care what else he does if he can only kill the prophet in him. F.W. Boreham tells about a young minister he heard on fire for the Lord, but he heard him a year later after he had started to a certain school, and he said, I couldn't pinpoint the trouble exactly, but he didn't sound like himself.

Still a year later he heard him, and he said, by then the work had been done, and the only thing I could think of was a line in curl papers. Well, we have lines who get tied up in curl papers of niceties and sort of a smothered so that they no longer have the freedom of the pulpit. It's time for the preacher to be a preacher.

He's been everything else. They used to call preachers reverend. I didn't care for the title, but at least it indicated respect, and that's better than the back-slapping familiarity that calls ministers by the first name and reduces them to a run-of-the-mill ordinariness.

We've become so interested in relevance that we lose reverence. The world, the flesh, and the devil, and even the church have conspired to flatten all preachers into one uniform designed like eggs in a crate. My brethren go out standing tall in the power of the ministry.

False pride can ruin a preacher, but so can false modesty and a phony humility. After all, humility does not consist in thinking meanly of oneself. It consists in not thinking of oneself at all.

Moses had to learn that he must be bold in the Lord, and so did Joshua, and God said to Jeremiah, say not that I'm a child. Amos was not embarrassed by the elite epic Bethel. Paul was the least of the apostles, he said, but he asserted that apostleship with vim and vigor.

When Moody came back from his great campaigns in England where a great preacher sat at his feet, somebody asked him, didn't it embarrass you, knowing as they did that Mr. Moody was not well-educated, for these giants to sit there listening to you? He said they looked like grasshoppers. He simply meant that when a man goes out in the power of the Lord, he does not fear mortal men. You remember the spies who came back from looking over the land, and they talked about the giants in whose sight we were as grasshoppers.

We were in their sight because we were grasshoppers in our own sight. Any prophet or any preacher who has a grasshopper complex in his own mind will be regarded and classified duly as a grasshopper in general. Any prophet who has waited in solitude before God with an open Bible knows more about the issues of the day than all the experts.

After all, it's been said you don't have to belong to who's who to know what's what. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 4 that there are three courts before which every preacher's work must be judged. There's private judgment, I judge not mine own self, public opinion, with me it's a very small thing that I should be judged, the viewer of man's judgment, and divine justice, he that judgeth me is the Lord.

He awaited the verdict of eternity. Ananias didn't tell Paul at his conversion what a big church and top salary awaited him. Paul didn't write the jailer where he was going and say I want a prison cell on the east side where I can get the morning sun, he did ask Timothy to bring that old cloak because his arthritis was acting up in that raw climate.

I see lovely homes by lakes and in mountains sometimes and often think my how I could write if I lived at a place like that. But the New Testament was not written on a vacation, much of it was written in jail. Paul wasn't living at a pleasant resort when he penned the epistles and Bunyan didn't write Pilgrim's Progress in a villa on the French Riviera.

Good preachers are always underpaid too, they're never fully appreciated. One good look at Calvary ought to cure any man of that itch anyway. But whether adequately paid or properly appreciated is incidental.

The only thing that matters is that when earth's last picture is painted and the master of all good workmen faces us and we face him at the greatest size, that he'll be able to say not just done or half done but well done. Sixty years ago God called me to preach. It never occurred to me to figure out how many years would pass until I'd have it made.

I was a green country boy in the red dirt hills of western North Carolina. I didn't know anything, didn't even suspect anything. I've never been happier than when I started out as a young preacher before I'd heard too many Bible scholars.

I can't help thinking of the motto I saw in an old country doctor's office a long, long ago. It's what you learn after you know it, all that counts. It never crossed my mind to doubt that God would take care of me.

Like the little girl, as she sort of misquoted it, the Lord's my shepherd, that's all I want. That's the way I felt about it. I didn't have any foundation, oh yes I did.

Other foundation can no man lay than is laid in Christ Jesus. The only sponsorship I had was So Send Thy You. I didn't have any projects.

I was not raising money to buy mosquito netting for Eskimos. I didn't have any sidelines. I told Dr. Paul Reese some years ago, I said, I'm going to have to get me a banjo and learn how to pick it.

Every preacher has to have a sideline today. I'm just a preacher. I've never been a drug addict or an athlete or a TV performer.

I'm at a great disadvantage. He'll tell me sometime later on, ask me, have you got your banjo yet? Well, I haven't got it yet, but we've come to a time when some think preaching's not enough. When I started out, I didn't have social security, financial security, but I had eternal security.

I never expected the road to be easy. I'd been taught the way was straight and narrow and not crowded. If I were starting out today, I would have no more fear of 1974 than 1913.

All the way my Savior leads me, what have I to ask beside? Can I doubt his tender mercy, who through life will be my guide? I'm more thrilled with the ministry in my 70s than ever was in my 20s. I'm often disgusted with myself and disappointed with men, but still delighted with God. When God calls a man to preach, everything that man will ever need is included in the contract.

He doesn't have to wait for a talent scout to find him, he doesn't have to cool his heels in the anteroom of anybody's little sanctum sanctorum asking for a job, he doesn't have to worry about open doors if he knows the keeper of the keys. God's able to make all grace to abound so that we, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work. That just about wraps it up.

We'll always have all that we need to do all God wants us to do as long as he wants us to do it. When you sign that covenant, there are no loopholes in the fine print. You may fail God and men may fail you, but he abideth faithful.

Any young preacher who tries to figure it all out and study the occupational hazards before he begins is poor material for the ministry. That's not the road our fathers trod. They climbed the steep ascent of heaven through peril, toil, and pain.

O God, to us make grace be given to follow in their train.

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