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He Was the King

TIM WILLIS

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple ... “Woe to me!” I cried ... “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (Isa 6:1, 5)

I learned some of my most important lessons about church while a member of a fraternity at Abilene Christian University. The fraternities there are not like the fraternities we see in movies. Although there were some relatively innocent “shenanigans” typical of college-aged guys, there was also an unmentioned competition among the clubs over which one would be recognized as the most Christian. I chose my fraternity because it had been formed 10 years earlier for the expressed purpose of bringing a Christian fraternity to the campus. I took that description very seriously, probably too seriously. After graduating I discovered that most (if not all) of the existing fraternities on campus had originally been organized for the purpose of bringing a Christian men’s club to the campus.

At the time, I thought the differences between our clubs were wide and clear. In hindsight, I see that we were virtually indistinguishable. We all conducted devotionals at some point in our club meetings. We all encouraged our fellow club members to lead moral lives. (Well, most of us did.) Whenever the natural competitiveness that drives young men kicked in, it often spurred us to organize service projects or to look for ministry opportunities.

To be honest, though, I think we would all admit now that our attitudes about one another back then were not consistently Christian. The competitiveness we felt could easily steer us to be skeptical of the purity of others’ motives. When we heard our friends talking about the significant spiritual experiences they had in their club meetings, we were likely to question under our breath the genuineness of their claims. It was

not uncommon for members of one club to spread rumors around campus about disreputable goings-on in the other clubs.

This competitive spirit was most obvious during Sing Song, a musical show and contest between the various clubs and classes on the weekend before the Bible Lectures. A single trophy would give a group bragging rights (and, for some, the assurance that God favored them) for a whole year. Often there were unofficial, behind-the-scenes charges circulated by losing groups about extra money spent or partisan judges or some other phantom injustice that had contributed



to the winning group's success. I have sometimes wondered if Christian athletes react in similar fashion when they lose an important game.

Sadly, I have witnessed similar attitudes and patterns of behavior among Christians—between individuals, between congregations, between church schools, between denominations. Christians quietly compete with one another over who has the correct interpretation of some doctrinal point, over whose hermeneutic is best, over who is most honest or sincere in their Christian walk. Supporters of one Christian school have doubts about the orthodoxy of another, being only too eager to spread rumors that confirm their presuppositions about “those people.” We question the motives of those who sing a different set of songs than our church does or who make even the smallest innovations to their worship. If another church has a successful program, we wonder whether their success is based on God's blessing of their efforts or on their ability to appeal to the entertainment wishes of their members. Surely, we think, their faith cannot be genuine—they cannot be “the real deal”—because if they were, they would be attending our church, or at the least they would be worshiping the way we do.

I believe that Isaiah the prophet grew up in this sort of environment and that he possessed the attitudes I have been describing. Using his own language, I think he was one who was “hearing, but never understanding . . . seeing, but never perceiving” (Isa 6:9). He had eyes, but he did not see; he had ears, but he did not hear. He spoke of it as a spiritual disease.

It is important for Christians to recognize the nature of such a disease because it eats away at our very essence as Christians. It turns our hearts toward suspicion rather than trust; it causes our conversations to veer toward strife rather than encouragement; it fuels our thoughts with jealousy rather than mutual appreciation; it cultivates an atmosphere of pride in ourselves and mistrust of others rather than an atmosphere of humility and gentleness and harmony. For Isaiah, healing came—he received sight—in the vision when he was called to be a prophet (Isa 6:1-8). Perhaps, by examining this event, we can be shown how to receive healing from our own spiritual diseases.

HEALING OUR OWN SPIRITUAL DISEASES

First, we need to get some perspective on this event, which is recorded in Isaiah 6. The fact that Isaiah sees what is happening inside the temple strongly suggests that he is familiar with this area; in fact, it is likely that he is there when he has the vision. Only priests were allowed into the temple sanctuary. Therefore, even though we cannot be absolutely certain, we can make a strong case that Isaiah was a priest before he became a prophet. Working with that assumption, several other insights about the circumstances of Isaiah's vision become possible.

It is the year of the death of King Uzziah. This bit of information is important, not just because it helps to fix the date for the beginning of Isaiah's career (c. 740 BC), but because it highlights a situation that could easily have influenced Isaiah and his self-image. The reign of King Uzziah is described in 2 Kgs 15:1-7 and 2 Chr 26:1-23. The details provided by these accounts reveal that the reign of Uzziah overlapped with the reign of his son Jotham for several years. Historians who have worked on this minor issue estimate that the overlapping lasted at least eight to ten years. This happened because Uzziah entered the temple with the intention of offering incense himself rather than obeying the laws that restricted temple access to priests. Some 80 “courageous priests” warned Uzziah not to go through with this, but he angrily insisted he would anyway. And the Lord smote him with leprosy. This forced Uzziah out of the temple and into physical seclusion for the rest of his reign. It was under these circumstances that Jotham came to the throne, even though his father was still alive and (technically) reigning as king for several more years.

It was also under these circumstances that Isaiah would have been in training as a priest. We do not know his exact age, but it is likely that he was an adolescent or perhaps a young man at the time of Uzziah's sin and punishment. Such an event was likely to have some influence on this young priest's perspective on his life. The priests naturally functioned as “gatekeepers” for Israelite worshippers. The Law stipulated that

worshippers had to be “pure” and “clean” when they approached the Lord with an offering, an offering that the priests would then present to the Lord. It was the priests’ job to monitor the purity and cleanness of those who wished to offer something to the Lord, and it was clear that only priests—and specially purified priests—could venture into the sanctuary itself. The story of Uzziah’s leprosy would serve as an irrefutable warning to any who dared to question the priests’ authority and rights in this regard. Even the king—even one who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kgs 15:3)—was not exempt from this restriction.

I wonder, then, how this event influenced Isaiah’s thinking; I wonder how it affected his self-image as a priest. My conclusion, based on his reaction in this vision, is that he grew up to feel just as confident of the Lord’s approval of him and his actions as he was confident of the Lord’s disapproval of Uzziah’s actions.

Like those facing similar conditions previously in the Bible . . . the presence of the Lord evokes in Isaiah an all-consuming sense of his unworthiness.

The vision Isaiah describes consists of a mixture of palace and temple symbolism. The Jerusalem Temple was designed as if it were a large throne-room, with the Ark of the Covenant representing the footstool of the Lord’s throne (see 1 Chr 28:2; Ps 132:7). The throne-room symbolism of the temple comes to life in Isaiah’s vision. This association with royal imagery is confirmed by Isaiah’s statement, “my eyes have seen the King” (Isa 6:5). There are

also the allusions to things of the temple. The seraphs call out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.” Holiness is most directly associated with the Lord and His residence (see Hab 2:20). The “glory of the Lord” filled the tabernacle whenever the pillar of fire and cloud rested over it (Exod 40:34-38). The “glory of the Lord filled the temple” when the priests deposited the ark there (1 Kgs 8:10-11). Now, the sense of the Lord’s presence overwhelms Isaiah, because he sees that “the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3).

Isaiah’s reaction to all this is quite suggestive. Like those facing similar conditions previously in the Bible (Exod 40:34-38, 1 Kgs 8:10-11), the presence of the Lord evokes in Isaiah an all-consuming sense of his unworthiness. Isaiah’s forerunners had been holy priests like Moses, pure and clean and worthy to enter the sanctuary; yet they had felt impure and unclean and unworthy when they had so closely experienced the presence (the glory) of the Lord; and so they had left the sanctuary when God’s glory filled it.

Isaiah’s experience has a similar effect on him, but his self-description adds a different element to the picture in his case. Isaiah describes himself not simply as “unclean,” but as “a man of unclean lips.” The only passage in the Law that brings together “lips” and “unclean” is Lev 13:45, where lepers are told to warn others to stay away by covering their lip and calling, “Unclean, unclean.” Isaiah seems to be identifying his unworthiness as a sort of spiritual leprosy.

This identification of his sense of unworthiness as spiritual leprosy suggests that Isaiah now identifies with Uzziah, who bore the physical disfigurement of leprosy for his prideful misdeed for the last several years of his life. But Isaiah’s remarks imply that Uzziah’s shame has possibly led to a feeling of self-righteousness on the part of Isaiah. It would have been a very natural reaction for a young Isaiah to have. As a priest, he was able to approach the Lord and interact with the Lord in ways that most others—including the king—could not do. It would be natural for a young priest in his position to feel confident about his standing with God. He is one of the gatekeepers. He is one whom the Lord can trust to defend his honor and holiness.

But now, all that changes. Now Isaiah identifies with the leprous king. The shameful status he had attributed to the king he now attributes to himself (and to everyone else in the kingdom). Now he is unclean. Now he is the leper. Now he is totally unworthy to approach the Lord.

It is important to recognize here that Isaiah has not committed a specific wrong for which he needs forgiveness. There is no hint that he has been trying to hide some offense from the Lord that the Lord has now exposed. He is charged with no wrongdoing, and he confesses no wrongdoing. His confession—and thus

his repentance—goes much deeper than that. He recognizes that he is “a man of unclean lips . . . *because* my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (A more literal translation of the latter clause shows that the emphasis is on what Isaiah sees: “because the King, the Lord Almighty, have my eyes seen.”) What he had been “seeing” was himself in comparison with other people around him—particularly in comparison with King Uzziah—and he could rightly claim to look pretty good in those comparisons. But that had the effect of afflicting his heart with pride.

Now, one day “in the year that King Uzziah died,” he finally sees “THE King”—not the earthly king, but the true King of Israel. What he “sees” in the temple that day completely changes the way he “sees” himself. He sees himself in comparison with the Lord, and in such a comparison, he recognizes his insurmountable inability to be righteous. He not only “falls short of the glory of God,” he is wholly unclean.

Such an event transforms the way he “sees” others as well. He not only identifies with the leprous king, he identifies with everyone else in the land. They are all in the same boat; they are all the same before the Lord. The transformation is not complete yet, though. The Lord does not open Isaiah’s eyes to the truth about himself only to leave him in a state of uncleanness and despair. Now that he can “see,” Isaiah is truly ready to receive the sanctification and renewal that the Lord offers. A seraph approaches him and purges his “unclean lips.” The resulting declaration draws on the priestly language of sacrifice and purification. Instead of Isaiah “bearing his guilt” (see Lev 5:1-4), the seraph announces that his “guilt is taken away” and his “sin atoned for” (see Lev 5:6, 10, 13). The uncleanness he has just realized is just as quickly removed. The state of cleanness he had previously assumed he now experiences genuinely for the first time. The effect is profound, as his long prophetic career testifies.

Isaiah’s story is one that we all must hear, especially those of us who have lived many years in a church environment. It is easy for us to look at ourselves in comparison with other people and therefore never “see” ourselves as we really are. As long as we fail to “see the Lord,” we are prone to view ourselves as the “gate-keepers” of the Lord’s sanctuary, taking it upon ourselves to decide whom God welcomes and whom he denies. But when we “see the King, the Lord Almighty,” as Isaiah saw the King, our sight improves dramatically.

We see with humility the gifts of a gracious and merciful God. We see with gratitude the genuineness of our sister’s act of kindness. We see with gentleness the sincerity of our brother’s repentance. We see with sympathy the depth of our neighbor’s pain. We see with childlike hearts the glow of our Father’s face.

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