

**“MEETING THE MAKER”**  
***Isaiah 6:1-13***

We have a lot of different euphemisms for death, don't we? Some of them are very spiritual - being promoted to glory, going to our eternal rest, being called home (sometimes the cause of some confusion! Keith Judson's e-mail address is [keith.judson@homecall.co.uk](mailto:keith.judson@homecall.co.uk)). Some of them are a bit more mundane and prosaic – passing on, leaving this vale of tears, cashing in our chips, **meeting our Maker**. Once we have met our Maker, it's highly unlikely that we'll have the opportunity to tell anyone what he looked like. Isaiah did, though.

The passage we've just read from *Isaiah 6* gives us a glimpse of our Maker. It's not a terribly detailed glimpse and Isaiah's account of the experience is necessarily impressionistic. But it's pretty awe-inspiring nonetheless. There are all kinds of images and resonances here, a whole heap of suggestions and hints that give us some idea of what an amazing sight it was without actually telling us exactly what the prophet could see. There are no personal details of God's appearance, no descriptions of his face or of his body. But the reader comes away from this passage sensing something of the power of this encounter.

For many of us, I suspect, this is a familiar passage. After the first oracles that the prophet has pronounced, he recaps to describe his call. He tells us the exact year in which it happened – usually reckoned to be 740BC – a year which marked a sea change in the fortunes of God's people as the great king Uzziah (or Azariah) died after a reign which had been second only to that of Solomon in its peace and magnificence. Uzziah had been a godly king and the people had been well led for the most part. Now the whole political climate was about to change and there were to be great transformations in the life of Israel.

At this point, Isaiah goes to worship God and has this extraordinary vision of the Lord on his throne. Most English versions translate it as in the “temple”, but the word actually means “palace”. We don't know if the prophet was in the Temple when he had the vision, or thought he was in the Temple or just saw God in a magnificent heavenly palace. Whatever it was, the effect on him was remarkable. And the picture which we have painted by these few lines here gives us a great insight into the mighty God whom we worship and serve. Here we see a God who **Reveals, Redeems and Refines**.

## **1. THE GOD WHO REVEALS**

Although, as we've said, we don't have a detailed description of the Lord here, nevertheless we find out a good deal about him. And Isaiah also finds out about himself, too, as he stands in the searching gaze of God's holiness. This encounter with God is revealing in all kinds of ways – as we find, too, when we encounter the Living God.

### **a) He reveals himself**

Above all else, what comes through here is a picture of holiness. There is a sense in which God is apart from Isaiah and his little world. He sits on his high throne, exalted above the prophet. His great robes fill the temple and he is surrounded by celestial beings – here they're called “*seraphim*”, the Burning Ones. As they sing their praises to the Lord, the whole edifice shakes and fills with smoke – always a sign of the holiness of God as he approaches the earth. Someone has said that the smoke is the steamy mist that comes from the interface of God's extreme holiness and the sinfulness and evil of the world.

The whole imagery employed here is that of burning holiness – “*holy, holy, holy*” was the Hebrew way of expressing the strongest superlative: the “very holiest holy”. Geoffrey Grogan describes this vision of God as that of “*a God of burning holiness.*” The smoke, the Burning Ones”, the hot coals – they are all pointers towards this all-consuming holiness. And it issues forth in glory – “*the whole earth is full of his glory*” sing the heavenly beings. “*Glory,*” writes George Adam Smith, “*is that in which holiness comes to expression.*” The brilliant holiness of God is seen in the glory of his presence.

What an awesome picture of an awesome God! But this God also deigns to speak with his people. He may be high and lifted up, but he comes to talk with his prophet. This is not a God who is remote from his people, who stays aloof and detached, who conducts his business through intermediaries. This is a God who can look out over the world and ask for help – “*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*” This God wants to include his creatures in his plans and purposes. This God has broken into our world in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, to identify with and suffer with his people. Supremely, this awesome God has revealed himself in the man of Nazareth – and that is where we can meet him today.

**b) He reveals humanity**

But Isaiah is only too aware of the Lord’s holiness. He comes cowering into his presence. I often wonder about those people who say so brashly, “Well, when I get to meet God, I’m going to ask him a few straight questions.” I don’t believe anyone will be able to stand before God and not bow the knee, and not fall prostrate in dumbfounded amazement and reverence. Isaiah and the prophets are all able to make their complaints to God, to ask him the hard questions about why this, that or the other is happening to Israel. But actually confronted with the Living God, the mighty prophet is reduced to whimpering about “*unclean lips.*”

The great glory of God serves to emphasise the sinfulness of his servants. This burning holiness searches out every little nook and cranny that is filled with deceit and shame. Isaiah is about to embark on his life’s mission of proclamation and preaching, but first he must cope with the personal confrontation. He needs to see inside his own heart and sort that out. God reveals his need of grace and redemption. Again, that’s how we see God at work in Jesus, as he cuts to the heart of those he meets, pointing out to them their need of God, their need of transformation. Those of us who have the privilege of speaking God’s word to others, need to see ourselves in the mirror of God’s burning holiness if we are to proclaim the gospel with integrity. Isaiah recognised that he lived “*among a people of unclean lips*”, but he first recognised that he himself had that problem. And God was there to help him sort it out.

**2. THE GOD WHO REDEEMS**

Isaiah stands there aware of his sin and shortcomings, before the God who could annihilate him in an instant. And as he stands there quaking, blurting out his confession, he sees one of the Burning Ones flit down from the altar with a live coal in his hand. Is he coming to incinerate the prophet? Is this the end for Isaiah? No! He is coming to touch those unclean lips and redeem them for the Lord’s use. He is coming to cleanse and renew, to purge of the old sinfulness and equip for the new task. God does not reveal himself to destroy, but to redeem. And there is no need for sacrifice.

This would have seemed a strange situation to Isaiah and his hearers – the fire and the holiness, but no burnt offering. Here, once again, there is a foreshadowing of the new covenant that is to be made in Jesus Christ. One of the great things about Christianity is that it does away with the necessity of a physical ritual of sacrifice. Humankind had always come to God to try and expiate the guilt of his soul by offering a sacrifice, a burnt offering. But here, nearly eight hundred years before the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on Calvary, we find this Jew, quivering under a recognition of his own sin, surrounded by suggestions of physical sacrifice – but he offers no sacrifice himself except that of confessing his sin.

He has somehow been granted boldness to enter the holiest place – here he has really gone “*beyond the veil*” into the holiest of places, into the presence of God. And here he receives that touch of God that enables him to speak directly to God and hear what he has to say. We have been granted boldness to enter the holy place through the blood of Jesus – and, once there, sacrifice on our part is superfluous. All we can do is enjoy the presence of the Holy One who has taken away our sin. As Isaiah’s lips were touched by the burning coal, he heard the words, “*Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.*” As we approach God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can know our sins atoned for and

enjoy the relief of our guilt's being taken away. We are redeemed, renewed, equipped to serve God. Our God is a redeeming God.

### 3. THE GOD WHO REFINES

But this experience is not an end in itself. I'm sure Isaiah could have dined out on this story for the rest of his life. Just think how it would have been managed today – a book on the subject, a conference and preaching tour, TV interviews, merchandising, a place of pilgrimage – all in order to tell people what had happened. But God wasn't interested in what *had happened*: he was interested in what was *going to happen*. As with all encounters with God, "*unless the experience issues forth in some kind of service, it will turn in upon itself and putrefy,*" as Ostwalt writes. God has redeemed the prophet and now refines him for his work.

It's interesting in the light of what we're often saying about the prophets and other figures of the Bible finding excuses for rejecting God's call that here Isaiah actually volunteers to go for God. His encounter has been so powerful, he has had such a vision of God's holiness, and has sensed the vulnerability of God's cry "*Who will go for us?*" to such an extent that he actually wants to be part of God's work. There is no holding him back – "*Here am I. Will I do? Let me go.*"

So many people today, it seems, are following the spirit of the times and seeking experience. How often do we hear people saying, "I want God to touch me," or "I want to sense God's hand on me"? Well, in a way there's nothing wrong with that – so long as that's not all it is. If we only want to get blessed up and to know the warm fuzzy feeling inside then, as C S Lewis once said, "*A glass of port will do that for you.*" But how often do we hear people saying, "I want to be used by God," or "I really want to get to grips with living as God wants"? It's not quite such a common cry. But again, that can't be all there is to it. If, like Isaiah, we are to be truly on fire for him, we need those encounters with the holy and awesome God, too.

Both the experience and the desire to live out the consequences of that experience should be part of what we are seeking from God. We come to the foot of his throne and acknowledge his holiness and our own unworthiness, we seek his redemption and refining and so move to the foot of the cross. But we cannot stay there – there is a world to be won for the Kingdom, and God is still looking for those he can send. You don't have to be sent to the end of the earth – only to your next-door neighbour or your colleague at the next checkout or desk – but however far it is, it needs a sense of God's activity in your life and an encounter with the **revealing, redeeming and refining** God to set you on your way.

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**Questions for discussion**

1. Have you ever had a vision of God's glory? How did that happen? What was your reaction?
2. In our desire to paint a picture of a God who loves and forgives, do you think we have lost an awareness of his holiness? If so, what are the effects of that? And what could we do about it?
3. Does your view of God remind you of your own sinfulness? How do you deal with that?
4. How aware are you of God's redeeming grace? How does that affect your daily life?
5. Does your enthusiasm to live for God wax and wane? How could we try to maintain our enthusiasm for God and for living for him? How can we encourage one another in that?
6. Has anything in particular struck you from this story?