

THE ARISTOCRATIC PROPHET

Isaiah 6:1-8.

Isaiah was the most famous of all the Old Testament prophets. So far as can be ascertained, he was born about 760 years before Christ. The only thing that we know about his ancestry is that he was the son of Amoz. He appears to have come from noble stock, to have received a first-class education, and to have won distinction at the court in Jerusalem. As a prophet, Isaiah served during the golden age of prophecy, from about 740 to 700 B. C., and had for contemporaries Amos, Hosea, and Micah. In most ways Isaiah was the greatest prophet which the Hebrews, that prophet-producing people, ever had.

Like every normal young man, before his conversion Isaiah was a hero-worshiper. And the idol of his adoration was no less a personage than King Uzziah. Well might the king appeal to the adventurous heart of youth. He was one of the greatest kings; perhaps surpassed by only David, Solomon, and Hezekiah. He erected great towers, built up strong defenses, and made noteworthy achievements. He overthrew the Philistines, the Ammonites, and the Arabians. He gathered a standing army of over 300,000, and provided such a large supply of weapons that other nations considered them formidable. The nation was blessed with every token of divine favor, and Uzziah was hailed as the human saviour of his people. He infused his people with intense national pride. He was so successful and so popular that multitudes looked more to him than they did to the Lord.

Energized by such unusual material prosperity, Uzziah allowed his remarkable success to go to his head, and he became inflated with pride. Forgetting himself, he yielded to that arrogance and presumption which so often accompany success. One day, under the spell of his pride, he went into the temple, and sought to be more than king by burning incense at God's altar, which was a task that God had assigned to priests only. As long as his heart was right with God Uzziah had been wonderfully blessed, but when he was filled with pride and dared to disobey the Lord's command by presuming to occupy the office of a priest, God smote him with leprosy. And that terrible disease drove him from the palace to the pesthouse. Royal personage though he was, he was compelled to live in isolation until his death. When he went the way of all the earth, the faith of many seemed to collapse. Among his fondest admirers, upon whom his death had such a depressing effect, was the youthful court preacher, Isaiah. He had leaned too much on royalty, and now his hero was dead, and buried in an out-cast's tomb. Bewildered, he wondered what would befall the nation.

Facing a crisis that he dared not try to meet alone, Isaiah wended his way to the Temple to find comfort and to meditate on God's ways. The Lord's house is the best place for anyone to go in time of sorrow and need. In the Temple Isaiah received a vision which made an indelible impression upon him and completely transformed his life and work. In that hour, when his heart was so heavy, Isaiah turned his eyes away from the vacant earthly throne and looked to the heavenly throne, which is never vacant.

In relating his experience in the Temple, which explained how he came to be the man that he was, Isaiah said, "I saw the Lord." He saw Him sitting upon a throne in majesty and glory. The Lord had not just recently taken that position, but He had been there all of the time, waiting to reveal Himself to Isaiah, who thus far had not looked His way. When Isaiah could no longer see his earthly king upon his earthly throne, he saw the King Eternal upon His eternal throne. His idol king had to be taken away before he saw the real King. Is it not often so with us? It is often not until some fond idol of ours has been removed that we come to see the Lord. For Isaiah, it was

a golden sunrise after a gloomy sunset. Nothing more wonderful could have happened to any man than that. What a difference it made in Isaiah when he saw the Lord, Who was holy, enthroned, and reigning! And what a difference it makes on any of us to have a spiritual vision of the Lord! We need to see God as Isaiah saw Him--sovereign, august, and holy.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he also observed some celestial beings that he called seraphim, standing near God's throne. The seraphim were full of swift energy, blazing with enthusiasm, and glowing with fervent love. In describing them the prophet said, "Each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly." Why did each one cover his face with two wings? He was overwhelmed with a holy sense of awe and reverence and was not able to look into the face of the Lord. Why did he cover his feet? His keen sense of unworthiness caused him to do so in order that he might not be seen. Why did he stand with two wings outstretched? He wanted to be ready to go instantly and joyously wherever God might command him to go. He was exceedingly anxious to render swift and unquestioning obedience. Each of them cried, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory."

As Isaiah beheld the glory and heard the lofty ascription of holiness chanted to the Lord, he saw clearly the sinfulness of his own heart and the error of his ways. He discovered his own impurity by gazing on purity. When anybody stands in the presence of the Lord, a sense of sin always overwhelms him. Is it true, as someone has said, that the man who has no sense of sin has very little sense of any kind? When the revelation of the holiness of God burst upon Isaiah, the revelation of his own unholiness came home with startling force, and he cried, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips." As soon as the confession was off his lips, the shining seraph flew on the wings of mercy and touched his sin away. Divine forgiveness and spiritual cleansing are the entrance to a life of promotion, honor, and lofty destiny.

Following his vision of enlightenment and his experience of cleansing, Isaiah received a divine call to work. He was convinced that God, Who had so graciously cleansed him, was appealing to him for service. The Lord said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" In response to that call, without a single question about the task to which God was calling, the young man gave himself unreservedly into the hands of the Lord for life. He offered himself to the Lord, just as he was and with all that he had--his personality, his possessions, and his plans. Without any thought of position, possessions, or power, he gave himself in wholehearted service for the glory of God and the good of others. He sincerely believed that he had been saved to serve. Wherever he went Isaiah lived for God and was faithful in telling the story of His marvelous grace. He considered it an honor to serve God, and was ready for any sacrifice which the honor might entail.

Isaiah's equipment and training were the best that his age afforded. In body, in mind, in temperament, and in personality, he was superbly endowed with the qualities that fitted him for highest usefulness. His intimate knowledge of the city, the kingdom, the surrounding nations, and the history of the world fitted him to interpret the meaning of all the movements of the various peoples in the light of God's will. The greatest influence in his life was the compelling grip of God's hand upon him that kept him constantly at the task of preaching.

Religious conditions were in a deplorable condition when Isaiah went forth to speak for God. The people of Israel had been brought into Palestine to give a religious quality and a message to the nations round about. Instead of playing this role they had come down to the same level as their neighbors and had become importers rather

than exporters. There was very little religious depth, the moral fibre was gone, and ethical standards were low. Prophets did not have any message of value, had they been interested in helping spiritually.

Isaiah was very jealous for the Lord of hosts. He was always intolerant of sin, especially in priests, leaders, and kings. His many-sided genius enabled him to roll out caustic irony and burning satire on the follies, the fashions, the extravagances, and the vices of the rich classes in Jerusalem. His eagle eye ranged over every department of life, and he uttered his burden or oracle on every matter touching the social, political, and religious life of the people. It was a cry of honest, fearless rebuke of sin, and testimony for eternal truth. He stood for righteousness in the life, the home, the palace, and above all in the Temple, which was the center of religious feeling and action. As to his own people, he pleaded with them, wooed them, wept over them, and entreated them to turn to the Lord and serve Him; painting in roseate hues the blessedness and security of a godly nation.

For forty years Isaiah spent his life preaching, predicting deliverances, writing prophecies, and counselling kings. These experiences were made beautiful by a dignity, a personal magnetism, a clear faith, and a genuine love for God that continually called out his best efforts. Through stormy days and in the sunlit seasons he was the man of the hour. He was the greatest man of his generation. As a statesman he had no equal among the prophets. As a preacher of social righteousness he had no equal among the prophets. He had deep convictions, kindly courage, clear vision, spiritual intuition, and unusual power in driving home the truth. His love for righteousness grew out of his keen appreciation of the absolute righteousness of God and the divine abhorrence of sin.

Isaiah's righteous indignation burned at the very thought of injustice, cruelty, oppression, dishonesty, and immorality. Not once did he elect to condone unrighteous acts in any individual. Kings, judges, princes, and merchants are all chastised by his stinging rebuke. With his head in the clouds, as it were, and his feet on the earth he spent his days trying to help sinful people to see God as he knew Him, to hate sin as God hated it, and to turn as devotedly as he had done to the work of blessing human hearts. His thoughts were practical, his judgments accurate, his vision clear, his zeal aflame, his purpose large, and his enthusiasm unbounded. He walked with God, and that delightful fellowship did something for him that is indescribable. With all his heart he hated uncleanness and loved holiness. He spent his life and ministry trying to get Israel to become acquainted with God and His Word and to trust implicitly in God's guidance. Surely that is a worthy aim for any man in any day!

On the basis of his wonderful experience in the Temple, when he saw the Lord, Isaiah's ministry was characterized by an emphasis on the holiness of God, the sinfulness of the people, the need for God's cleansing power, the call to His service, and the certainty of His judgment. Among scores of most practical lessons which he taught, we are impressed by these:

1. A vision of God always brings a consciousness of personal unworthiness.
2. The first impulse of a cleansed soul is to seek to lead others to the Lord.
3. A consciousness of the Lord's presence makes any task appear possible.
4. Blessing and obligation are inseparable. Privilege always brings corresponding responsibility.
5. A life that is lived in accordance with the will of God is never a failure.
6. A great faith in God will give needed courage in the darkest hour of danger.
7. When God calls any person to a task, He will always provide the necessary resources for victory.