

Hearing Our Call

October 30, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”



Today we explore the call that God has upon our lives. We will do so primarily through the story of God’s call upon Isaiah’s life, but we will also touch on the call as heard through Zacchaeus as he and Jesus interact in Luke 19 as well as through the words from Paul to the church in 2nd Thessalonians 1. As we begin this time together, let us pray...

Please turn with me to our Old Testament reading for today, found in Isaiah 6. In this passage we find God’s call upon Isaiah and his life. But before we look at this chapter, a quick summary of chapters 1-5. Here we find the context of Isaiah’s call.

In these five chapters we read about Isaiah's vision from God. It begins with God's condemnation of the wickedness of Judah. After a brief moment of hope for a glorious day that will come in the future, God pronounces judgment on the people's arrogance for a chapter and a half. After another brief return to hope – to the promise of a branch that will lead God's people back to holiness – chapter 5 is filled with a song about the unfruitful people and the injustices that are an abhorrence to God. Overall it is a picture of sinful and deprived living with a very thin silver lining of hope. It is into this context that Isaiah receives his call. If we were in his shoes, just having received this gloomy report, how would you feel about accepting a call to service? In a similar way, today, if we took in the scope of our world, and all its issues, would we readily volunteer if God came calling?

Turning to chapter 6, we see that verses 1-4 set the scene. Here we read about the glory and power and might of God and heaven. God is seated on the throne and the hem of God's robe fills the temple. God is surrounded by magnificent creatures called "seraphs" – they are singing praises to God. They sing, *"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of God's glory"* and their song shakes the foundations of heaven. What a contrast this scene is to the sad and sorry state of affairs in the land of Judah.

In verse 5 we hear Isaiah's response. Here, in the glorious presence of God, he states, *"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips."* Present to the glory of God and all of heaven, Isaiah recognizes that he is a sinner. He doesn't belong here! Extending that thought, he realizes that he lives among people of unclean lips - they don't belong here in heaven either. To me, this is familiar ground. Certainly at times I've hit the pause button and thought the same thing. I'm a man of unclean lips and of impure motives at times.

I wonder how I could possibly think that I am worthy to stand in God's presence when I am lost in my sin. Reflecting on the poor state of my heart and soul, I have felt uncomfortable to enter into God's holy presence at times. Maybe you too have felt what Isaiah is feeling. Yet God does not leave Isaiah – or you or me – in this place.

Instead of leaving Isaiah there, God takes away his guilt and atones for his sin. One of the seraphs takes a coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips with the live coal, saying, *"Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out."* God purifies Isaiah, much as God does with you and me as we come and confess and repent of our sins, being cleansed by the blood of Jesus. This is a place that we have all been to. Over and over again we receive undeserved mercy and grace from God. Again and again we have had our guilt removed and our sin atoned for. We have experienced God's love and grace restoring us to right standing before God, just as Isaiah does.

Then, in verse 8, God seeks someone to go to the people of Judah, to go to these people of unclean lips. Knowing and experiencing God's grace and forgiveness firsthand now, Isaiah declares, *"Here I am. Send me!"* - *"Here I am. Send me!"* This was his grateful response to God's love for him. This was Isaiah's joyful offering for a debt wiped clean. Is this our response to the same God who redeems and restores each of us again and again?

Turn with me to our New Testament passage as we look at the story of Zacchaeus, found in Luke 19. It is a familiar story. Jesus has been in the area and is now passing through Jericho, where Zacchaeus lived. There were always stories of Jesus – his teachings and the miraculous healings – always buzzing around in people's conversations. Even someone in Zacchaeus' position would know about Jesus. So he too wanted to see Jesus.

But we read that Zacchaeus had three things going against him. First, he was not the only one who wanted to see Jesus. There was quite the crowd gathered that day. Second, he was short. He could not see over the crowd. And third and most important, Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. He wasn't just a tax collector. They were universally hated by the Jews. Tax collectors worked for the occupational force and commonly extorted money from their fellow Jews. Any complaints about this would be turned away with threats of Roman force being called upon to make the Jews pay up. Zacchaeus was a "*chief tax collector*." That means that he oversaw the lesser tax collectors in the area. So Zacchaeus would collect a commission from each of these men. This allowed Zacchaeus to become very rich. So he would be hated even more than the universally hated common tax collectors. Imagine him trying to work his way through a crowd to get to the front where he could see Jesus. I'd imagine more than a sharp elbow or two was used to keep him well away from the street.

Zacchaeus runs on ahead of where Jesus was passing by and climbs a sycamore tree so that he can at least see this Jesus as he passes by. Culturally, this would be a very humiliating thing for a man of Zacchaeus' power and wealth to do. It demonstrates his genuine interest in seeing Jesus. And when Jesus comes by, in verse 5 we read, "*Jesus looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'*" Calling him by name, Jesus reveals his divine authority. Scrambling down out of the tree, he was happy to welcome Jesus. Not only does he get to see Jesus, but Jesus wants to come to his house! Things are working out pretty good for Zacchaeus.

So why did Jesus stop and invite himself to Zacchaeus' home? To me, it is because Jesus came for a purpose too. Overall I believe it was to reveal what God's love looks like when

fully lived out in this world. We see this today in Luke 19 as Jesus engages one who was lost. Fulfilling his call to reach the lost rankled some feathers – and not just the feathers of the religious leaders. Zacchaeus was much more widely hated than that. Zacchaeus was a man who was socially, physically, and spiritually “out on a limb.” He knew that there was a discontentment, a hole in his life, if you will. He has heard of this Jesus and wants to see him, maybe even to encounter him. But Zacchaeus was an outsider. He was hated. Yet like a child he climbed a tree to catch a little glimpse of this Jesus passing by. Jesus notices him and invites himself into Zacchaeus’ home – into the home of a known sinner.

Everyone else is upset by this. ALL who were there started to grumble, saying, *“He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”* Ignoring this, Zacchaeus instantly revealed that he is a changed man. He proclaims, *“Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”*

Normal restitution called for adding 20% to the cost of what was lost. If it involved theft the punishment was usually 4 or 5 times its value. From promising to repay four times as much, Zacchaeus shows that now he saw his job as stealing from the people. Quite an honest admission.

Jesus is quite impressed. In verses 9 and 10 we read, *“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”* Zacchaeus was a child of Abraham by virtue of his Jewish birth. But in his response to Jesus, he demonstrates that he now has the faith of Abraham as well. This last verse – *“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost”* – is the theme verse of the gospel of Luke and arguably for all of the New Testament. Jesus came for people like Zacchaeus and for people like you and me.

Fast forward with me a little bit in the New Testament, to 2nd Thessalonians 1. This is the second letter from Paul, along with Silvanus and Timothy this time, written to the church in Thessalonica. After the first two verse, the introduction, Paul gets to business in verse 3. Here we read, *“We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.”* Paul commends the church and gives thanks to God for their faith. Reports that have come in testify to a rapidly growing faith in this church and community of believers. The proof or fruit is in growing love for one another. Observers can see the love that the church members have for one another. Paul praises God for this awesome witness to the world around them.

Continuing on, Paul tells them that he has been boasting about their *“steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.”* They are living their faith out well even as the persecutions and suffering has increased since the time of Paul’s first letter. This praise would encourage them in their faith. It would stimulate their resolve to endure and remain faithful. For Paul, persecution and suffering were signs or evidence of *“the righteous judgment of God.”* Turning to the rest of verse 5, we read that the current hardship *“is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God.”* There is a refining process here at work.

To that end and with that refining process in mind, Paul offers this prayer for the church in Thessalonica in verses 11 and 12: *“To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him,*

according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul hopes and prays that God would fulfill every good purpose and every act prompted by their faith. He hopes and prays this for one reason: so that the name of Jesus Christ might be glorified. In the same way, our purpose – my purpose and your purpose – is not just to come to church so that we can grow in our faith. Our purpose is also to go out into the world, living and loving well so that we can grow in our love of God and of others. This aligns with the heart of Christ.

In Luke 19 we see that salvation comes to Zacchaeus. Here we learn that it was Jesus’ mission to *“seek out and to save the lost.”* That was the call that went out through Isaiah the prophet after he declared to God, *“Here I am. Send me!”* Our call as followers of Jesus is to seek out and save the lost. May we to declare our readiness before God, seeking to be ones sent out into the world, living out God’s call upon each of our lives. As it was for Isaiah, as it was for Paul, as it was for Jesus, may it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow.* In light of the call stories and in hearing of God’s call upon all of our lives, where might God be calling you to offer healing and wholeness to the world?
- 2) *Pray.* When have you recently heard God calling your name or nudging you to love one who is on the margins? In prayer, ask God to flesh out that call.
- 3) *Study.* Re-read Luke 19:1-10. When have you run into Jesus? How can you share your experiences so that others pursue Jesus as well?