



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Call to Kingdom Service, Part 3

Isaiah 6:8-13, And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” 9 And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

“ ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’  
10 Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.”  
11 Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:  
“Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is a desolate waste,  
12 and the LORD removes people far away,  
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.  
13 And though a tenth remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak,  
whose stump remains  
when it is felled.”  
The holy seed is its stump.

### The “Half Time Talk”

In many sporting competitions, there is a thing known as the half time. It is an extended break in which the teams go into their locker room to lick their wounds, regroup, and evaluate strategy. Now invariably in almost every sport with a half time, there is the “Half Time Talk”! This is that moment, right before the team once again takes the field, where the coach gives an inspiring speech to lift the spirit of the team, throw light on a dark future, and so build up the hope and confidence of the players.

It is my privilege to give the half time charge which God intends all His servants to receive. Isaiah penned this chapter not only to convey the call that God placed on his life, but also to convey the call that God has placed on the lives of all His people! Thus far we have seen that the call to kingdom service that it involves a contradiction. On the one hand the minister laments his own weakness and inability (v. 5). On the other, he beholds the grace of God (vv. 6-7) which comforts him and so emboldens him to serve (v. 8). And so he goes from struggling with a profound sense of his insufficiency to an overwhelming desire to serve. That’s the contradiction out of which ministry arises!

It also involves a commissioning (vv. 8b-9a) which as we saw is august, greatly to be desired, and yet one which will place great demands on us.

Notice thirdly, the call to kingdom service involves a difficult calling.

Isaiah 6:9, “And He said, “Go, and tell this people [this is a striking divergence from the normal, “My people.” Clearly at this point, the nation had ceased being ‘the people of God’ and in fact had become to the Lord as a secular nation!!!- which explains the message God gave to Isaiah, which was...]: ‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand’”: This was indeed to be Isaiah’s message to his contemporaries. And yet, it is important to note that there is no record of Isaiah ever pronouncing this message verbally to the people of Judah. Now that doesn’t mean that at some point he didn’t speak these words. However the implication is quite clear: Isaiah was called to minister amongst a people who did not have the spiritual faculties/capacity to understand his message. They would “listen” to his message, but they would not “perceive” what he was talking about. Via Isaiah’s preaching, the nation would “look” many times into the truths of God’s Kingdom, but they would not “understand.”

Now from the perspective of the servant of Christ, this is rather shocking. How long would Isaiah continue as a prophet and so a minister in Judah? Almost sixty years!!! Do you realize the implication?

Right here, at the beginning of his ministry, Isaiah is told that there would be no fruit when it came to turning the nation around; not even a raisin! And yet as we'll see, this man did not shrink back. Rather he boldly went into the harvest and labored. In fact, not only would Isaiah not bear any positive fruit, the net result of his ministry would be the condemnation of the wicked! Notice that to which he was called:

Isaiah 6:10, "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed."

This reflects the cold reality of ministry in a world that is hostile toward God. We would will that our ministerial efforts for Christ would produce "positive" fruit.

- The conversion of the lost.
- Encouragement to the down hearted.
- The implanting of a deeper commitment to prayer.
- Healed relationships and restore homes.
- Inspiring a greater passion for the Lord, His work, worship, will, and Kingdom.

Yet this is but half of how God uses the minister and the ministry. In a world that is hostile to God, the Lord has deigned to redeem a relatively small portion of people (always remember that "...the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it," Matthew 7:13). Much of what we do as Christians will be toward the condemnation of the lost. That is the sad reality of ministering in a state where people hate God! Now what is meant by the call given to Isaiah here? The text is straight forward; it reads in the English much the same as in the Hebrew. It was God's intent to use Isaiah to harden the hearts of many in Judah.

It was Christ's intent to do the same in His day. Quoting from this very text, Christ explained to His disciples why He spoke in parables:

Matthew 13:11-14, "And He answered and said to them, 'To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall *more* be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, "You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive."'"

Now if this is the path our Savior trod, ought we not to tread it ourselves? Indeed! The noble/august ministry that God gives to His people oft-times involves being used by God to condemn the wicked. In light of this we would expect that Isaiah, with his higher education and upper class whit, would be able to confuse the majority of those who heard him. He'd use big words and complex ideas to communicate their need to repent, yet they wouldn't understand. That is how the text seems to read. Yet if we supposed therefore that Isaiah purposely mislead the people in his ministry by speaking above them, we'd be wrong. For indeed, it was just the opposite!

Listen to the criticism of the men of Isaiah's day who sat under his ministry but did not respond:

Isaiah 28:9-13, "To whom would He teach knowledge? And to whom would He interpret the message? Those *just* weaned from milk? Those *just* taken from the breast? For *He* says, 'Order on

order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there.” [In other words, Isaiah taught with such clarity and simplicity that his critics took offense saying that his message was beneath them, “*Isaiah should be teaching kindergarten!*” So God continued in His description of Isaiah’s ministry...] Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue, he who said to them, ‘Here is rest, give rest to the weary,’ and, ‘Here is repose,’ but they would not listen. So the word of the Lord to them will be, ‘Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there,’ That they may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared, and taken captive].”

God’s message to the non-believer is not beyond his intellectual ability to grasp it; the message of the Kingdom of God is not complex! It has and always will be simple; yet on account of their hardened heart and their rebellion and commitment to self they will not believe! E. J. Young put it this way:

It was not darkness and a famine of hearing the word of God that would destroy the nation; it was light, too much light. (Young, 1965)

Motyer added:

It was at just such a time that Isaiah was called to the prophetic-preaching office and understood what his terms of commission meant: he was to bring God’s word with fresh, even unparalleled clarity—for only the truth could win and change them; but in their negative response his hearers would pass the point of no return. The opportunity which could spell their salvation would spell their judgment. (Motyer, 1993, p. 84)

What an apt description of the nation to whom Isaiah ministered. God described the nation with these words:

Isaiah 43:8, “Bring out the people who are blind, even though they have eyes, and the deaf, even though they have ears.”

The problem with sinful people is NOT that God’s message is complex, and so hard to understand. Rather it is that the non-believer is blind and so refuses to listen, see, and understand!

2 Corinthians 2:14, “...a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”

In fact, listen to the divine commentary on this era of redemptive history:

Zechariah 7:12-13, “‘And they made their hearts *like* flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets [of which was Isaiah]; therefore great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. And it came about that just as He called and they would not listen, so they called and I would not listen,’ says the Lord of hosts.”

Do you understand the implication? As He does with all His servants, God sent Isaiah to minister to His generation, and He sent him to do it with sincerity, passion, and a longing for positive fruit. At no time did Isaiah purposely cloud his message or hope for a non-response. In fact after himself referencing Isaiah 28 and the simplicity of Isaiah’s message, Alec Motyer observed this:

...the whole Isaianic literature bears the same mark of a plain, systematic, reasoned approach.

(Motyer, 1993, p. 84)

Yet that doesn't mean that God in His providence deigned to use Isaiah to turn the nation back. In fact, quite the contrary God in our passage told Isaiah *beforehand* that his service in the Kingdom would yield no positive fruit! After sixty years of ministry, those who loved God would continue to love Him, and those who hated God would continue to hate Him. From this we must see that ministering in the Kingdom of God is not easy. Rarely does the minister actually get to behold the fruit of his labors. The norm is seemingly fruitless work. Listen to the struggle of the servant of God as he reflected upon his ministry:

Isaiah 49:4, "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity...'"

You must see that the ministry to which God calls us is difficult. Many, many times it will find us mouthing these words, "What am I doing? Why am I wasting my time? I'm toiling in vain!" In light of this, I ask you, "What ought you to expect when it comes to your ministry? Your calling?" We need to answer this!

- Because we serve a great God, we assume that any work done in His name will be relatively easy and so bring forth much fruit.
- Yet this is a fiction. The curse brought upon this earth by our sin means that our work will be done by "the sweat of the brow" (Genesis 3:17-19)- including Kingdom Ministry!
- Did you get that? There is no asterix in our Bibles when it comes to the curse. Yet the way most of us live, you'd think a footnote had been placed at Genesis 3:17: "The following characteristics exclude Kingdom Work."

Many of us come to church and discover that apparently no one had the struggles that you have. Most of us find that our efforts in the cause of Christ seemed to yield nominal fruit and a lot of thistles, everyone else seems to know only ease and blessing. But if we only look a little deeper we will see that many in the church suffer, even the ministers suffer. They suffer through split churches and being run out of pulpits and then they also start to realize that the ministry is not how many portray it. Hear me well!

- Holiness is tough.
- Praying is tough.
- Being a child raised by sinful parents is tough.
- Being single is tough.
- Marriage is tough.
- Parenting is tough.
- Biblical fellowship is tough.
- Being a faithful church member is tough.
- Engaging the lost is tough.

If you are involved in ministry you will see great pain, suffering, heart-ache, trial, sadness, and even persecution. So why do we come here and act as if everything is "O.K."? We are all too busy acting as if we have it all together. So what ought we to do?

1. First, you want the support of the body? Be real!
2. Second, realize transparency is tough, and any who would seek to give it is going to be hurt!
3. Third, in sharing of your struggles, don't expect anyone to fix you. You do not share to be fixed,

but to have brothers/sisters support you in prayer, to prompt others to care about something other than themselves!

4. Fourth, if you should be on the receiving end of someone sharing, your first, second, and third response ought NOT to be to fix them, BUT to listen, then pray, and pray some more!<sup>1</sup>

So the ministry to which we have been called involves a difficult calling, notice fourthly that it involves a deeper concern.

Isaiah 6:11a, “Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’ ...”

The beauty of literature is that God is able to be quite precise in what He intends for us to know. The liability of literature is that it is hard to convey passion and feeling. This text is a prime example of that.

- We could take this question simply as a point of clarification involving no concern at all no pathos: *Lord, for the record, how long am I to minister in this way?* Yet that would be an injustice to the text.
- Understanding full-well the nature of his call and the fact that the nation would remain for a time in rebellion against God, Isaiah could not depart from the Lord before pleading/wrestling on his knees, “How long will this hardening remain?”

In fact, according to E. J. Young, Isaiah’s response in this text is a prayer and so a petition on behalf of the nation for their ultimate redemption. The tone is that of a lamentation! The idea here is,

*“Lord, how long will this hardening last? When will the period of grace begin? Will You always chide? Won’t there come a time of grace and forgiveness?”*

From this we see an important element of ministry that it involves a deep concern for the people to whom we are ministering. Isaiah cared deeply for Judah, and so he gave a visceral response to the Lord’s message of judgment, “Lord! Let it not be permanent!” Geoffrey Grogan wrote this:

It should not be assumed that the prophets found God’s message of judgment easy to utter (cf. Jeremiah 1:6-8, 17; Ezekiel 2:3-8 et al.). They belonged to the nation they addressed and must often, like Jeremiah, have wept for its sins and its certain judgment (Jeremiah 9:1; 14:17). (Gaebelein, Grogan, Feinberg, Ellison, & Alexander, 1986, pp. Vol 6, Pg 58)

You say, “*This isn’t Rocket science! I’m stating the obvious.*” And you are right. The point is clear; yet its implication oft-times is not. Because ministry often involves deep concern it engages the heart and so makes us advocates and cheerleaders of the ones to whom we are called:

- What will be the result if those for whom we labor do not respond?
- What will happen if they in fact hurt us?

This no doubt is why Jeremiah was known as the “weeping prophet.” He invested so much of his heart into the people of God, only to have those very same people trample underfoot his heart! We see it in Paul:

2 Corinthians 11:28-29, “Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure upon me *of* concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my

intense concern?”

Now take this concern and introduce treachery and what will you get? A weeping apostle!

2 Corinthians 2:4, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears...”

Understand that you cannot be a servant of Christ and NOT be burdened by the people to whom you have been called. There is going to be pain if you care about the body of Christ. In this context, notice the duration of Isaiah’s ministry:

Isaiah 6:11b-12, “Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’ And He answered, ‘Until cities are devastated *and* without inhabitant, houses are without people, and the land is utterly desolate, the Lord has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.’”

This has clear reference to the exile of God’s people which would occur in-total in 586 B.C. That means that Isaiah was called by God to open himself up to the pain and struggle of ministry for no less than 54 years: when the nation went into exile and so was “devastated,” “without inhabitant,” “utterly desolate,” and “forsaken.”

Now brothers and sisters, if you knew this in advance, how would this effect your expectations?

- You’d be prepared and ready to minister knowing that there would be little for which to rejoice and much for which to cry.
- When difficult times came you wouldn’t second guess your calling.
- When people whom you love hurt you, you wouldn’t hurt them in return.
- In and through it all you’d “...entrust your soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet. 4:19)!

In light of this listen; you know the only difference between you and Isaiah? God spoke directly to Him in a vision to inform him of the nature of ministry whereas we have to read it in the Bible! Did you get that? What is stated here concerning Isaiah is what we ought to expect and so prepare for when it comes to:

- Living in a body of Christ.
- Serving a spouse.
- Parenting children.
- Engaging the world.

Now all that we’ve seen is rather bleak! Is there anything to encourage us? Notice finally that it involves a confidence. Speaking of the devastation of His people on account of His judgment, God said this:

Isaiah 6:13, “Yet there will be a tenth portion in it [that will remain], and [yet] it will again be *subject* to burning, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”-

Notice that this is a bitter-sweet promise. The good news is that there would be a small remnant of God’s people who would not be destroyed on account of the exile. And truly, that is what occurred. Starting in

538 B.C., God's people formally returned to Palestine where they set about the work of rebuilding. And though it was a small portion of what the nation once was; it was a portion! But this brings us to the bad news: according to this text, in time the remnant would themselves rebel against the Lord, and so once again be subject to the disciplining hand of the Lord. And that is exactly what happened. By the time of Christ, the nation had rejected the worship and service of God, such that when the Messiah was sent to the earth, they crucified Him.

Yet there is good news; for even here there'd be a remnant! And so what at first was a devastated forest (cf. Isaiah 10:34-11:1), life nevertheless would remain in one "holy stump" from which God would raise up a mighty forest, the church, which would overtake the entire world!

Now could Isaiah have foreseen all of this in its detail? No! In fact Peter says as much in 1 Peter 1:12. Yet he would have deduced from Isaiah 6:13 that in spite of the wickedness of the people to whom he had been sent<sup>2</sup>, God's grace eventually would triumph. All the trial, struggle, and bitterness of ministry someday would produce fruit and the knowledge of this would keep Isaiah going!

How about you? What if I told you that in the work you are doing for the Lord, you will not be privileged to see much if any of the fruit for which you are laboring? Would you serve? The only way you could is if you went with the confidence that God had called you and so was working out His good pleasure in and through ALL things including sin, set-backs, bad decisions, etc.

Accordingly, look at Isaiah 6:13 and the promised fruit! From this we have the confidence that as a servant of Christ our life is holy and so profound in its purpose and impact. E. W. Smith addressed the doctrine of God's Sovereignty as it relates to ministry. He begins by contrasting "fatalism" with divine providence:

The most comforting and ennobling is also the most energizing of faiths. That its grim caricature, fatalism, has developed in human hearts energy at once sublime and appalling is one of the common-places of history. The early and overwhelming onrush of Mohammedanism, which swept the East and all but overthrew the West, was due to its devotees conviction that in their conquests they were but executing the decrees of Allah. Attila the Hun was upborne in his terrible and destructive course by his belief that he was the appointed 'Scourge of God.' The energy and audacity which enabled Napoleon to attempt and achieve apparent impossibilities was nourished by the secret conviction that he was 'the man of destiny.' Fatalism has begotten a race of Titans. Their energy has been superhuman, because they believed themselves the instruments of a super-human power.

If the grim caricature of this doctrine has breathed such energy, the doctrine [of providence] itself must inspire a yet loftier [energy], for all that is energizing in it remains with added force when for a blind fate, or a fatalistic deity, we substitute a wise, decreeing God. Let me but feel that in every commanded duty, in every needed reform, I am but working out an eternal purpose of Jehovah; let me but hear behind me, in every battle for the right, the tramp of the Infinite Reserves; and I am lifted above the fear of man or the possibility of final failure. (Smith, 1902, pp. 181-182)

Then applied directly to the Christian, Smith added this:

His feet plucked from the horrible pit and planted on the Eternal Rock, his heart thrilled with an adoring gratitude, his soul conscious of a Divine love that will never forsake him and a Divine energy that in him and through him is working out eternal purposes of good, he is girded with



invincible strength. In a nobler sense than Napoleon ever dreamed, he knows himself to be a ‘man of destiny.’ (Smith, 1902, p. 154)

Such is the nature of our call and so the confidence with which we ought to engage in the ministry of God’s Kingdom.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The longer I am in ministry, the more and more I see that God is the author and perfecter of the faith! We are not called to fix people. Rather, we are called to be a vessel of encouragement as we all wait upon God to bring about His sanctification (cf. Heb. 3:13)! People have asked me, “How can you counsel so many people, hear their problems, and not be overwhelmed by it all?” The answer is that I must rely upon God to act in His time and so bring about His purpose and will in the lives of those to whom I am called!

<sup>2</sup> This chapter ends the way it began, in the devastation and ruin of sin. In fact, using the grammatical tool of Inclusio, Isaiah structured this book such that it conveys a message to all living as faithful servants in a time of wickedness. Because of the iniquity of the day, life is going to be tough. But in and through all things God remains on the throne (cf. Is. 6:1)! Don’t despair. Minister in the hope and confidence of Christ!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 24, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.