

Crisis of Leadership



SABBATH AFTERNOON

When asked by one of his disciples about the ingredients of good government, Confucius answered: “Sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the confidence of the common people.”

“‘But,’ asked the disciple, ‘suppose you had no choice but to dispense with one of those three, which would you forego?’

“‘Weapons,’ said Confucius.

“His disciple persisted: ‘Suppose you were then forced to dispense with one of the two that are left, which would you forego?’

“Replied Confucius, ‘Food. For from of old, hunger has been the lot of all men, but a people that no longer trusts its rulers is lost indeed.’”

—Edited by Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1989), p. 215.

People do, indeed, want strong, trustworthy leadership. When a soldier signed up for a second term of duty, he was asked why. “I tried civilian life,” he said, “but nobody is in charge out there.” This week we will look at Judah’s crisis of leadership and the sad results that followed.

The Week at a Glance: What spiritual dangers come with success? What prepared Isaiah for his ministry? How do we understand the idea that God “hardens” people’s hearts?

Memory Text: “In 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” (*Isaiah 6:1, NRSV*).

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 10.*

The King Is Dead. Long Live the King!

Isaiah 6:1 talks about the death of King Uzziah. Read **2 Chronicles 26** and then answer this question: **What is the significance of King Uzziah's death?**

Different perspectives can be given regarding the death of this king.

1. Although Uzziah's reign was long and prosperous, "when he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction" and attempted to offer incense in the temple (*2 Chron. 26:16, NRSV*). When the priests rightly stopped him because he was not authorized as a priestly descendant of Aaron (*vs. 18*), the king became angry. At this moment, when the king refused reproof, the Lord immediately struck him with leprosy, which he had "to the day of his death, and being leprous lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the Lord" (*vs. 21, NRSV*). How ironic that Isaiah saw a vision of the pure, immortal, divine King in His house/temple in the very year the impure human king died.

2. There is a striking contrast between Uzziah and Isaiah. Uzziah reached for holiness presumptuously, for the wrong reason (pride), and, instead, became ritually impure so that he was cut off from holiness. Isaiah, on the other hand, allowed God's holiness to reach him. He humbly admitted his weakness and yearned for moral purity, which he received (*Isa. 6:5-7, NRSV*). Like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, he went away justified: " 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted' " (*Luke 18:14, NRSV*).

3. There is a striking similarity between Uzziah's leprous body and the moral condition of his people: ". . . there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds" (*Isa. 1:6, NRSV*).

4. The death of Uzziah in about 740 B.C. marks a major crisis in the leadership of God's people. The death of any absolute ruler makes the country vulnerable during a transition of power. But Judah was in special danger, because Tiglath-pileser III had ascended the throne of Assyria a few years before, in 745 B.C., and immediately went on a warpath that made his nation an invincible superpower and threatened the independent existence of all nations in the Near East. In this time of crisis, God encouraged Isaiah by showing the prophet He was still in control.

Read carefully 2 Chronicles 26:16. In what ways do each one of us face that potential for the same thing? How can reflecting upon the Cross protect us from that pitfall?

“Holy, Holy, Holy” (*Isa. 6:1-4*).

Notice what was happening here in the first four verses of Isaiah 6. The king dies during great political turmoil (the Assyrians are on the warpath); it could have been, for Isaiah, a fearful time when he was not sure who was in control.

And then—what happens? While taken in vision, Isaiah gazes upon the blazing glory of God upon His throne, hears the antiphony of shining seraphim (“burning ones”) calling out the words “holy, holy, holy,” feels the resultant seismic shaking of the floor beneath him, and peers through swirling smoke as it fills the temple. It must have been a stunning experience for the prophet. Surely Isaiah now knows who is in control, despite outward events.

Where is the Lord in this vision (*see Isa. 6:1*)? **Why would the Lord make an appearance to Isaiah here, as opposed to anywhere else?** *See Exod. 25:8, 40:34-38.*

In Ezekiel 1; Daniel 7:9, 10; Revelation 4–5; the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, and John are in exile when they receive their visions. Like Isaiah, they need special comfort and encouragement that God is still in charge, as their world is falling apart (Daniel and Ezekiel are captives in a pagan nation that had destroyed their own, and John is exiled to a lonely island by a hostile political power). No doubt, these visions helped give them what they needed in order to stay faithful, even during a crisis situation.

John’s description of God’s temple in heaven is especially close to what Isaiah saw. See Revelation 4:8, where four living creatures, each of which has six wings, also sing “Holy, holy, holy” (*compare Isa. 6:2, 3*).

The transcendent holiness of God, emphasized in Isaiah’s vision, is a basic aspect of his message. God is a holy God, and He demands holiness from His people, a holiness He will give to them if only they would repent, turn from their evil ways, and submit to Him in faith and in obedience.

All of us have been in discouraging situations, where from outward appearances all seemed lost. Even if you didn’t get a vision of the “glory of the Lord,” as did Isaiah, recount the ways in which the Lord was able to sustain you and your faith during this crisis. What have you learned from these experiences that you could share with others?

New Personality *(Isa. 6:5-7).*

At the sanctuary/temple, only the high priest could approach the presence of God in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and with a protective smokescreen of incense, or he would die (*Lev. 16:2, 12, 13*). Isaiah saw the Lord, even though he was not the high priest, and, unlike Uzziah, he was not burning incense! The temple filled with smoke (*Isa. 6:4*), reminding us of the cloud in which God's glory appeared on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:2*). Awestruck and thinking he was finished (*compare Exod. 33:20; Judg. 6:22, 23*), Isaiah cried out with an acknowledgment of his sin and the sin of his people (*Isa. 6:5*), reminiscent of the high priest's confession on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:21*). Having experienced the worship of God from the lips of heavenly beings, Isaiah realized the inadequacy of worship offered by the lips of mortal, faulty human beings.

Why did the seraph use a live, or burning, coal from the altar to cleanse Isaiah's lips? *Isa 6:6, 7.*

The seraph explained that through touching the prophet's lips his guilt and sin were removed (*vs. 7*). The sin is not specified, but it need not be limited to wrong speech, because lips signify not only speech but also the entire person who utters it. Having received moral purification, Isaiah was now able to offer pure praise to God.

Fire is an agent of purification, because it burns away impurity (*compare Num. 31:23*). But the seraph used a coal from the special, holy fire of the altar, which God Himself had lighted and which was kept perpetually burning there (*Lev. 6:12*). So, the seraph made Isaiah holy, as well as pure. There is more. In worship at the sanctuary, or temple, the main reason for taking a coal from the altar was to light incense. Compare Leviticus 16:12, 13, where the high priest is to take a censer full of coals from the altar and use it to light incense. But in Isaiah 6, the seraph applies the coal to Isaiah, rather than to incense. Whereas Uzziah wanted to offer incense, Isaiah became like incense! Just as holy fire lights incense to fill God's house with holy fragrance, it lights up the prophet to spread a holy message. It is no accident that in the next verses of Isaiah 6 (*vss. 8 and following*), God sends Isaiah out to His people.

Read prayerfully Isaiah's response (*vs. 5*) to his vision of God. How do we see in it an expression of the basic problem of a sinful people existing in a universe created by a "Holy, holy, holy" (*vs. 3, NRSV*) God? Why was Christ on the cross the only possible answer to this problem? What happened at the Cross that solved this problem?

Royal Commission (*Isa. 6:8*).

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” (*Isa. 6:8*).

Having been purified, Isaiah immediately responded to God’s call for a representative whom He could send out on His behalf. In New Testament terms, Isaiah would have been called an apostle; that is, one who is sent.

Interestingly enough, the book of Isaiah does not begin, as do some other prophetic books, with the prophet describing his prophetic call (*compare Jer. 1:4-10, Ezekiel 1-3*). In other words, he must have already been called to be a prophet, even before the events of chapter 6. The Bible does show that a divine encounter can encourage a prophet even after the ministry began (*Moses: Exodus 34; Elijah: 1 Kings 19*). In contrast to other examples, too, God tells people they are to be prophets; in Isaiah 6, the prophet volunteers for a special mission. It appears that chapters 1-5 of Isaiah represent conditions at the time when Isaiah was first called, after which God jump-started his ministry by encouraging him at the temple and reconfirming his commission as God’s prophetic spokesman.

God encouraged Isaiah at His temple. Is there evidence elsewhere in the Bible that God’s sanctuary is a place of encouragement? Psalm 73 (see vs. 17), Heb. 4:14-16, 10:19-23, Revelation 5. What do these texts tell us?

Not only does God’s sanctuary throb with awesome power; it is a place where weak and faulty people such as ourselves can find refuge. We can be reassured by knowing that God is working to rescue us through Christ, our High Priest.

John also saw Christ represented as a sacrificial lamb that had just been slaughtered, its throat slit (*Rev. 5:6*). This was not a pretty sight. The description makes the point that although Christ was raised from the dead and has ascended to heaven, He continually carries the Cross event with Him. He is still lifted up in order to draw all people to Himself at His altar.

How have you found encouragement by entering God’s heavenly temple, by faith, in prayer? Hebrews 4:16 invites you to boldly approach God’s throne to “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (NRSV). If someone were to ask you how you have found grace and mercy in your time of need, what would your response be?

Appalling Appeal *(Isa. 6:9-13)*.

When God recommissioned Isaiah, why did He give the prophet such a strange message to take to His people *(Isa. 6:9, 10)*?

God does not want any to perish (*2 Pet. 3:9*), which explains why He sent Isaiah to the people of Judah—and Jesus to the world. God’s desire is not to destroy but to save eternally. But while some people respond positively to His appeals, others become firmer in their resistance. Nevertheless, God keeps on appealing to them in order to give them more and more opportunities to repent. Yet, the more they resist, the harder they become. So in that sense, what God does to them results in the hardening of their hearts, even though He would rather that these actions soften them. God’s love toward us is unchanging; our individual response to His love is the crucial variable.

The role of a minister, such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or even Christ, is to keep on appealing, even if people reject the message. God said to Ezekiel: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them” (*Ezek. 2:5, NRSV*). God’s role and that of His servants is to give people a fair choice, so that they will have adequate warning (*compare Ezek. 3:16-21*), even if they end up choosing destruction and exile (*Isa. 6:11-13*).

With these ideas in mind, how do we understand God’s role in hardening Pharaoh’s heart?

In Exodus 4:21, God says, “ ‘but I will harden his heart’ ” (*NRSV*). This is the first of nine times in which God said He would harden Pharaoh’s heart. But there were also nine times when Pharaoh hardened his own heart (*for example, see Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:34*).

Clearly Pharaoh possessed some kind of free will, or he would not have been able to harden his own heart. But the fact that God also hardened Pharaoh’s heart indicates that God initiated the circumstances to which Pharaoh reacted when he made his choices, choices to reject the signs God had given him. Had Pharaoh been open to those signs, his heart would have been softened, not hardened, by them.

Have you, in your own experience with the Lord, ever felt a hardening of your heart to the Holy Spirit? Think through what caused it. If you didn’t find that concept frightening then (after all, that’s part of what having a hard heart is all about), how do you view it now? What is the way of escape? See 1 Cor. 10:13.

Further Study: “Iniquitous practices had become so prevalent among all classes that the few who remained true to God were often tempted to lose heart and to give way to discouragement and despair. It seemed as if God’s purpose for Israel were about to fail and that the rebellious nation was to suffer a fate similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“In the face of such conditions it is not surprising that when, during the last year of Uzziah’s reign, Isaiah was called to bear to Judah God’s messages of warning and reproof, he shrank from the responsibility. He well knew that he would encounter obstinate resistance. As he realized his own inability to meet the situation and thought of the stubbornness and unbelief of the people for whom he was to labor, his task seemed hopeless. Should he in despair relinquish his mission and leave Judah undisturbed to their idolatry? Were the gods of Nineveh to rule the earth in defiance of the God of heaven?”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 306, 307.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 If a skeptic or an atheist were to challenge you with the question, “How can you show that your God is in charge?” what would you answer?
- 2 If God is in charge, why do innocent people suffer? Does Isaiah 1:19, 20 mean that *in the present life* only good things are supposed to happen to God’s faithful people and only bad things happen to those who rebel? Compare Job 1, 2; Psalm 37; Psalm 73. Can we reconcile our understanding of God’s character with the bad that happens to people? Do we need to?
- 3 In Isaiah 6, why are there so many connections to the Day of Atonement? Consider the fact that on this yearly judgment day, God purified His people by cleansing sin from loyal ones (*Lev. 16:30*) and purging out the disloyal (*Lev. 23:29, 30*).

Summary: At a time of national insecurity, when the weakness of human leadership was painfully obvious, Isaiah was given a grand vision of the supreme Leader of the universe. Petrified by inadequacy but purified and empowered by mercy, Isaiah was ready to go forth as God’s ambassador into a hostile world.

New Life for Starlight

J. H. ZACHARY

The vast American Southwest desert stretches stark and beautiful to the horizon. Hidden among the desert foliage stand the homes of Native Americans. The troubles that plague these families are as powerful as the rocky buttes that shadow their dwellings—alcoholism, poverty, prison.

The smile on *Starlight's face barely masked the sorrow that lay just below the surface, boiling forth in frustrated and uncontrolled anger that got her into trouble at school. When other children experimented with drugs, Starlight joined them. She had stepped onto a path that spiraled downward into a life of despair and failure. But her concerned parents learned about Holbrook Indian School in Arizona and determined to find a way to send her there. Starlight arrived at the school carrying a small parcel of clothes and heavy emotional baggage.

She arrived at Holbrook without a knowledge of Jesus, but God began to work in her life immediately.

"I have learned a lot here," she says. "I learned that Satan is controlling my life when I do bad things. Sin is all the bad things we do—things that Satan wants us to do. Even stealing a little piece of candy is a sin. If I know that what I am tempted to do is bad, that is guilt, and guilt is a sign from God that He doesn't want me to do it.

"At my other school I used to get into trouble a lot, but I can see how I have changed since I came to Holbrook. I like Bible class, and I think that it is the most important class.

"Here at Holbrook, I have learned how to pray. I never thought I would become a Christian, but I have accepted Jesus as my personal Savior. I don't use bad words anymore, and I don't talk back to teachers. I used to do drugs too, but not anymore. God made all this happen with His wonderful power over Satan. He has mighty power!"

Starlight has made the most important decision of her life at Holbrook—to follow Jesus. Holbrook Indian School has many challenges, but Starlight's testimony, along with those of other students, fills the staff with courage to continue working to rescue these children from destruction at the hands of Satan.

**Starlight is a pseudonym. She is now a high school student at Holbrook Indian School.*
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