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Conducted by  
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**“Would you please comment on the ‘cleansing’ of Isaiah the prophet as recorded in Isaiah chapter 6. What significance, if any, does this have for the Church today?”**

The passage of scripture mentioned refers, of course, to the call of Isaiah to the Lord God’s service. However, I believe it would be wrong to consider chapter 6 in isolation from the rest of the Book, and so to aid our understanding, we must place the incident within the general framework of the Book.

Modern scholarship now seems to agree that the Book of Isaiah is comprised of

two main sections. Chapters 1-39 speak of God's condemnation of the unfaithfulness of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) because of the lapses into sin and iniquity of the leaders and the people: they went in pursuit of other gods, rebelled against the rule of the true God. Yet alongside the condemnatory language used, there runs a thread of the hope of forgiveness and a promise that a remnant of the nation will be saved. It will perhaps help to put the call of Isaiah into context if we refresh our minds as to the state of the nation at that time.

It was the reign of Omri, some 28 years after the death of Jeroboam which plunged Israel deep into the displeasure of God. (1 Kings 16:16ff). Omri established his throne in Samaria, and it was he who married his son Ahab to the Phoenician princess Jezebel. She killed the prophets of the Lord, and established the worship of Baal throughout the land. Surely every Christian knows of the confrontation on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and how the slaying of Naboth was avenged by Jehu, a general in the army of Jehoram. Jehu appears in Scripture as a cruel and unscrupulous man, and removed all opposition to his own elevation as king. He was to reign for 28 years, and during that time, in order to gain security against Syria, he allied the nation to the growing power of Assyria. (Read 2 Kings 9,10). It was under Jeroboam 11 that the Northern Kingdom reached the zenith of its power, but as so often happens, prosperity brought ease and corruption, and the prophets — notably Amos and Hosea — constantly spoke warnings from God against the immorality of the leaders. Jeroboam's reign was to last some 41 years, and by the end of his reign the Northern Kingdom had not long to last. It is at this point that we must pick up the events of Isaiah 6.

#### THE CALL

The call came in the year that Uzziah, king of Judah, died. He was made king when he was sixteen years of age and he reigned in Jerusalem for fifty two years. We can pick up a lesson from what the Chronicler says about him, **"And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord . . . and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper"** (2 Chron. 26:4,5); but in verse 16 it says, **"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction."** How quickly our arrogant natures make us believe that we are stronger than God. He usurped the sacred function of the priests and was smitten with leprosy; his son Jotham had to act with him as regent.

Isaiah would, no doubt, be aware of the infidelity of the people in their relationship with God, but through the ages even to the present day, people have never realised the extent of their sinfulness until it was pointed out to them quite clearly and unambiguously; Isaiah was about to learn that very important lesson, and in the process he was to be given a vision of the glory of God.

His first mention is of God sitting upon His throne, **'high and lifted up'**. A recurring condemnation of that nation by God was that a succession of leaders had not removed the **'high places'**. We today, of course, believe that we can worship God wherever He dwells, and as He dwells in our hearts by faith (through Christ and the Holy Spirit) we believe that a specific place is not necessary for the worship of God. However, it was not so in the idolatrous worship of the Canaanite nations; they built their altars and shrines in prominent places and these became known as the **'high places'**, so despised by God. Unfortunately, God's people copied the worship of the heathen nations around them and so time and again incurred the displeasure of God. This was a blemish even on the good rule of King Jehoshaphat in that **"nevertheless the high places were not taken away"** (1 Kings 22:43). God seemed intent on showing Isaiah that no matter how high the altars of idolatrous worship were placed, they were still in the **'basement'**, so to speak, when contrasted with the exaltation, majesty, and power of the true God. His majesty and power encompassed all nations, His glory was unmatched by any heathen god.

Isaiah was then instructed as to how God viewed arrogance and pride, those ten evils much-practised by His chosen people. He saw the seraphim around God's throne: each one had six wings; two to cover the head, two to cover the feet, and two for flying; four wings for humility before God, and only two for utility. He was learning about the arrogance, pride, and self-sufficiency of a people who had neglected the God who had brought them out of the bondage of Egypt, had supported them in their occupation of the Promised Land, and who wanted to sustain them under His benign care. The seraphim reminded him that God was the Lord of hosts, and that His glory filled the whole earth. It was at this point that Isaiah came to realise the extent of his own sinfulness, and the exceeding sinfulness of the whole nation. The vision was not in vain.

The cry of Isaiah was one of true repentance. He knew that he was a man of unclean lips, and that he dwelt among a people of unclean lips. How did he come to this realisation? **"for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts"**. He could not remain, of course, in the presence of God being 'unclean', so one of the seraphim took a 'live coal' from off the altar and touched his lips with it, saying, **"thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged"**. The Hebrew word for 'lip' in the O.T. usually refers to the lips as organs of speech, e.g., **"the fruit of the lips is praise"**. So far as Isaiah was concerned, he was to be the messenger of God to the nation, and sullied lips would not do for the pristine purity of the message which God wanted delivering, i.e., that the divine decision regarding the fate of the nation had been made, and that judgment was about to be given.

That which touched the lips of Isaiah is also important to our understanding. In the time of the Judges an altar could be a single pillar of stone (Jg. 6:20), but generally it was a collection of unhewn stones (see Ex. 20:25; Dt. 27:5). The primitive idea was that the deity dwelt in the stone, and would be offended if the stone were broken. Isaiah 6:6 says that the seraphim took a 'live coal' or 'ember' from the altar, but the Hebrew word used, 'ritspah', literally means 'a hot or burning stone', or, to put it another way, a 'living' stone. Surely Isaiah realised that this meant that the **living** God would be with him in whatever he undertook, for he cried out in response to God, **"Here am I; send me"**. So Isaiah was sent with God's message, and chapters 6, 7 and 8 indicate God's judgment against Israel. Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, made an alliance and wanted Judah to join them (it should be noted that at this time 'Israel' and 'Ephraim' had become synonymous terms, so powerful had the tribe of Ephraim become). Ahaz of Judah declared himself a vassal of Assyria, and the final judgment of God was worked out when Sargon 11, king of Assyria, laid siege to, and captured, Samaria, deporting all the leading inhabitants. So the nation of Israel ended; Judah also had to pay a price, but that is another story. The reader must look to the second section of Isaiah's prophecy (ch. 40-66) in order to see the extension of God's love and mercy to his chosen people, and to the out-working of the Messianic prophecies on into the N.T. culminating in the new Israel of God, the Church.

### SIGNIFICANCE TO THE CHURCH

What we have said up to now has been, of necessity, just a brief and sketchy record of events, but there are some important lessons for us today.

We must always realise that God will act decisively against infidelity and contravention of His will by His children. Sometimes our arrogance and pride lead us to believe that we are masters of our own eternal destiny, but doesn't the confusion and chaos of our world today teach us that we cannot even control our **immediate** problems. Let us never attribute to God the confusion which reigns in our world; the wounds are self-inflicted, and if we destroy ourselves then it is by our own actions. Surely the acts of God's chosen people in earlier days proves this to us.

I also believe that we must realise that the Church is not a spiritual edifice built by God for our pleasure **in spite** of ourselves. We have been cleansed from sin to serve the living God, and we serve Him as 'living stones' not as inanimate ones built into an unresponsive edifice. Our sacrificial altar, as it were, is Christ, and praise be to God, **He lives**. We must echo the words of the Hebrew writer, "**We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle . . . Let us go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come**" (Heb. 13:10-15). Let God be true in all things. Let the Church be strong in upholding His will. Let us, with all our strength, promote His benign rule throughout **our** world today. Thus shall we please Him, and that is surely what we want to do.

In conclusion, I think I should point out to any reader who may not be a Christian in the way the N.T. teaches, that there is only one way to please God in response to the Gospel. We must believe (and 'believing' always implies 'doing' in the Bible), we must repent and confess Christ as Saviour and Son of God; we must then be baptised (immersed in water) for the remission of sins, and then we must strive throughout our lives to live the Christian life according to God's Word. That is the God-given way to become a citizen of the new Israel of God, the Church.

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden,  
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