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### Introduction

Christmas. Decorations are up. Trees are trimmed. I saw a sign that read: "Santa, this year I want a big fat bank account and a skinny body for Christmas; and don't get those two things mixed up like you did last year!" This time of year is filled with sights and sounds of the holiday. A familiar sound at this time of year is this (play Salvation Army bell ringing). Do you know what that is? Of course. It's the sound of someone ringing a bell while standing beside one of these (insert picture). The sight and sound of these kettles are a part of our Christmas season.

Every year, we hear a news story or two of someone putting the unexpected in one of the kettles. We often hear every year of someone putting a one-ounce gold coin in a bucket. This week, it was reported in the news that someone in Minnesota put a check for half a million dollars in a kettle! That was an **unexpected gift**. I remember last Christmas that a woman put her wedding ring in a kettle out in Boston. Her husband had died, and she put the ring in the kettle to honor her late husband, who was a generous man throughout the year, and not only at Christmas. The ring was valued at \$1,850, but it sold a few days later for an astonishing \$21,000—eleven times it appraised value! Not only was the wedding ring an **unexpected gift**, the value of the gift was **unexpected**. [Source: **Boston Globe** "Widow Drops Wedding Rings, Note in Salvation Army Kettle 12/8/14]

Something similar happened in a text that we're reading this weekend. Once we get into the text, you might be thinking that this is an odd text for Christmas. Where's Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus? Don't worry. Baby Jesus will show up.

### Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe is me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then 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!"

### CONTEXT

It was the year 739 BC when King Uzziah died. This was a critical moment in history for the nation of Israel. Even though Uzziah was struggling with leprosy and not living in the palace or among his people, he was still the king and with one of the longest, most significant reigns in Israel's history. He ruled for

fifty-two years, during which time Israel enjoyed peace, protection, and provision. So, when a ruler dies after a long period of prosperity, the nation experiences anxiety, wondering “what’s next?” There was a growing military threat coming from Assyria, and the Assyrians would be the first of two nations to invade and destroy much of Israel, taking tens of thousands of people as captives into exile. Yet, even though Israel enjoyed national prosperity, they were wallowing in spiritual poverty. Notice how Isaiah described their spiritual depravity: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight. Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks, who acquit the guilt for a bribe, and deny justice to the innocent” (Isaiah 5:20-23).

In the midst of the changing times, God provided Isaiah with a vision. Instead of a sick, leprous king *not* sitting with authority on his throne, GOD was seen on His throne! Isaiah declared, “I saw the Lord...”

## CONTENT

What did Isaiah experience when he saw this vision? What did Isaiah see? S.A.W.

### Sovereign

Isaiah SAW God for who He is; high and highly exalted; enthroned in majesty and *sovereignty*. Even the lowly hem of His robe was more than sufficient to fill the temple, reflecting the greatness of God. When the temple was built, King Solomon said in his dedication prayer: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! (1 Kings 8:27)

In verses 2-3, the seraphim are described worshipping God. This is the only passage in Bible for seraphs (seraphim) as compared to cherubs or cherubim. In Hebrew, their name means “burning ones,” which would refer to their purity. They are covering their faces and feet is an expression of their reverence for Sovereign God, while declaring that He is “holy, holy, holy.” This is the only trait of God mentioned in triplet. We read nowhere in the Bible that God is forgiving, forgiving, forgiving or loving, loving, loving. *Sovereign* God is holy, holy, holy. While they worshipped God, something supernatural happened in Isaiah’s vision; the temple filled with smoke and the threshold (i.e., foundation) shook. This represents a theophany, a temporary appearance of God.

### Admit

Yet, that is not all that Isaiah saw. He saw something more. When he saw God for who He is, Isaiah saw himself for who he was. After experiencing the holy and majestic presence of Sovereign God, Isaiah had to *admit* that he was a broken, ruined sinner.

Isaiah cried out about his sinfulness. In verse 5, his response was one of brokenness when he cried out that he was a “ruined” man. “Ruined” means to be silent such as when a disaster takes place and there is deafening silence. Isaiah was crushed with this reality, and was left speechless. When Isaiah declared that he was a man of unclean lips, we are reminded that Jesus said that everything sinful about us comes out from within us; that “out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). Moreover, Isaiah admitted that this sinful condition was not only true of him, but of every one. He lived among a people of unclean lips—of utter sinfulness—in comparison to Sovereign God!

After admitting his sinfulness, something happened that Isaiah was not expecting. In verses 6-7, a seraph is described as taking a live coal from the altar, and he touched the lips of Isaiah, taking away his sin.

Remember, the altar was in the temple, and it was where sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of sin. The live coal from the altar represents a burning, a refining that removes impurity—and in this instance, the impurity of sin. When Isaiah admitted to (or confessed) his sin, it opened the door to forgiveness. A broken and contrite heart is not despised by God (Ps 51:17). Isaiah received what he neither expected nor deserved, and that gave him hope in uncertain days.

### **Work**

When Isaiah's sins were forgiven, God mentioned a mission; a mission that involved going. Once Isaiah was forgiven by Sovereign God of his sin, Isaiah responded in a remarkable way. He wanted to serve God, particularly by going and sharing with others the news of this indescribable gift of forgiveness and hope. Romans 10:15 declares, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

More often than not, sermons from Isaiah 6 end in verse 8; but, not this one. We need to take a look at what follows. It appears in verses 9-13 that Isaiah would have a prophetic ministry of pain and misery. Yet, in the end the "stump of Israel" will produce holy seed, referring to the coming Messiah (Genesis 3:15). If we cut down a tree, over time the remaining stump can produce a new sprout that can grow into another tree. Though Israel will be cut down by invading armies, and though there will be difficult times in the days ahead, the Messiah would come. He would bring both help and hope to the people of God. The Messiah would bring about a final victory. Isaiah had a lengthy ministry, spanning some sixty years. It is believed that Isaiah was killed for his unwavering faith in God during Manasseh's reign by being sawn in two. So, God's call to Isaiah was not one in which he would be successful or comfortable as the world thinks, but one to which Isaiah was to be faithful. How could Isaiah possibly remain faithful to God? Isaiah knew that help and hope were coming. Isaiah knew that the Messiah would come—and he even wrote of that. The book of Isaiah has more prophecies about the Messiah than any other book in the Bible. Check this out.

#### **Isaiah 7:14**

"Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel."

#### **Isaiah 9:6**

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonder Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

"In the year that Uzziah died..." That was a defining moment for the nation of Israel, and that moment impacted the life of Isaiah, a God-follower. He saw God for who He is. Isaiah saw himself for who he was. And after receiving unexpected forgiveness, Isaiah was ready to be sent out to people who called "evil good and good evil." He was to share with them a message of hope—even if they would not listen to him.

### **Segue**

For over 2,700 years since Isaiah wrote his prophecies, nothing has changed. An enemy was growing in power and had its eye on Israel "in the year that King Uzziah died." In this year, ISIS, Al Qaeda and a host of other militant Muslim extremists have their eyes on America. A recent poll indicated that "eight out of ten Americans believe that a terrorist attack in the USA is likely in the near future that will cause large numbers of lives to be lost" [Source: Denison Forum 11/26/15]. Nothing has changed. As a nation, we have defining moments that impact our lives. Some of you were alive on December 7, 1941, "a day that will live in infamy" when Pearl Harbor was attacked. More of us were alive on November 22, 1963, when

in Dallas, Texas, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and soon after that on April 4, 1968, when in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Still more of us experienced 9-11 (2001), when the United States was attacked by Muslim terrorists, killing nearly 4,000 people. All of these dates—and others like them—are defining moments when we, as a nation, are jolted back to our spiritual senses. In such moments, we tend to look for and towards God. We turn to one another as we turn to God. Do you remember how churches were filled to overflowing the Sunday following 9-11? The same happened in Paris just weeks ago after Muslim terrorists killed a number of people on a Friday evening, when on Sunday morning, churches were filled with people.

Defining days happen personally, as well as nationally. Would you and I call these defining days in our individual lives, in our families, marriages and circle of friends? Have recent events caused us to have an encounter with God much like Isaiah did?

Can you and I say the same as Isaiah, "I saw the Lord"?

### S for Sovereign

A book was published long ago in 1962 called *Your God is Too Small* by author JB Phillips. Phillips noticed that the American culture was beginning to think of God as serving us, instead of us serving God; and since 1962, this thinking has become rooted, entrenched in the minds of the Americans. People often think of God as a "genie in the bottle," that grants our every wish, or as a benevolent grandfather who is always kind, loving and generous. Some people refer to God as the "big guy in the sky, a good buddy, etc." This perception of God has been fueled by our on-demand culture. Think with me. We even have an on-demand feature with television viewing—watching whatever we want with the push of a button designated "on-demand."

As our children and grandchildren grow up, something happens to them that happened to every one of us who are adults. Think of it this way. If our child is eight years old, we can tell them a story of a little child walking to the door and opening the door, only to be surprised that there is a super-hero on the other side of the door—then the 8 year-old's eyes would be wide with amazement. If we tell the story to a four year old, the five year old just needs to hear us say, "And when the door was opened..." for his eyes to be wide with amazement. If we told the story to a two year-old, his world can be summed up in a single word—"cookie." His eyes are wide with amazement just being able to toddle over to the door! The eight year-old needs a super-hero to be amazed, the five-year old just needs for the door to be suddenly opened, while the two year-old just needs to get to the door. The older we get, the more it take to fill us with amazement. How big is your God? Is your God too small?

All too often, our identity is wrapped up in WHO we are. We commonly have a triple AAA identity. Our identity is derived from our Achievements, our Addresses, and our Assets. A couple of the first questions we ask one another when we met are, "Where do you live and what do you do?" We have enough emotional intelligence to not ask, "How much money do you make?" I assume we have enough emotional intelligence to not ask that question! But, our identity is communicated by our assets, like the car we drive, the clothes we wear, the jewelry we buy, the hobbies we pursue, the trips we take, and more. We focus on WHO we are. Try this instead.

We are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." We belong to God. Who is God? In Exodus 3:14, God said, "I am who I am!" Listen to that: "I am who I am." God identified Himself as "I am." God used a noun that needed no adjective. God did not say, "I am strong, I am eternal, I am love, I am holy." God used no adjective nor adverb to describe Himself, just simple: "I am who I am." In the KJV, Exodus 3:14 states, "I am that I am!" God is saying: "I am that I was, I am that I is, I

am that I will be.” That is not good grammar, but it is great theology! God is so indescribable in His identity that He needs no adjective. And, we belong to Him! Friends, the secret to being able to live faith-filled Christian lives has nothing to do with WHO WE ARE, but in WHOSE WE ARE! And we are a people of God, the great I AM!

God, who does not change, is still seated on a throne, and the angels are still declaring, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord, God Almighty! The earth is still filled with His glory!” What will it take for us to see God for Who He is? A personal crisis? What will it take for us to be left speechless and in awe of His sovereignty? A profound tragedy? Why do we struggle to see God for Who He is? Could it have something to do with the fact that we fail to see ourselves for who we are?

#### A for Admit

Like Isaiah, do you and I see ourselves as sinners in need of our Holy God? Do we realize or comprehend how we live to please ourselves? Is life all about us or about God? Do we live as if we are kings leading our own kingdoms, doing as we please?

In 2012, Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots football team, revealed to the world that Russian president Vladimir Putin stole one of Kraft's \$25,000 Super Bowl rings. Back in 2005, when Kraft was visiting Putin at the Kremlin, he made the mistake of showing the Russian leader one of his Super Bowl rings. Kraft took it out and handed it to the Russian leader, who put it on his finger and said, “I could kill someone with this ring”—because it was so massive. Then, according to Kraft, Putin put it in his pocket, his KGB guys surrounded him, and they walked out—with Kraft's ring! It even had Bob Kraft's name engraved on it! Putin and his top aides declare that Robert Kraft gave it to the Russian president as a gift. Kraft asked our State Department to intervene, and they encouraged him, in the interest of U.S.-Russian relations to lie and say that he gave it to Putin as a gift. But Kraft broke his silence in 2012, and went public what happened. President Putin doesn't admit that he took a \$25,000 championship ring belonging to someone else, nor does he admit that he took the Crimea away from Ukraine. It would appear from his actions that Putin is king of his kingdom.

Then again, we are no different than the Russian president in that we struggle admitting that we are just as guilty of sin. We are sinners. God is holy. We are ordinary. God is extra-ordinary. It is His kingdom, not ours. When we sincerely admit who we are, like Isaiah, we receive the *unexpected*. When we are broken and contrite over sin in our lives, we receive the *unexpected*, and that being mercy of God.

#### **Lamentations 3:22-23**

Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for His compassions (i.e., mercies NLT) never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Morning by morning, new mercies I see. We see. The word mercy in Hebrew (*hadas*) means “never before experienced.” God's mercy today is different than yesterday's or the day before or the day before that. Figure out how old you are in days, not years. For example, this weekend, I'm 21,432 days old. God has mercied me 21,432 times, and still more besides! Even when I am completely undeserving, He has mercied me—and you! Jesus Christ, the Messiah, has come. Immanuel, meaning “God with us,” has come. The Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace has come—and He has died for our sins. Moreover, He has been raised from the dead giving to us eternal life! Jesus has come—offering to each and every one of us HELP in the here-and-now, and HOPE for the hereafter! That *unexpected* gift has an *unexpected* value! This good news is to be shared, which is our...

## W for Work

All around the globe, there are people crushed and in need of hope. Some are refugees. Some are prisoners of persecution. Some are enslaved against their will. Yet, they are not only all around the globe, people in need of hope are all around us. They live across the street and down the hall. They work at the same place and attend the same school. Some even have the same last name and live in the same house.

Like Isaiah, God is sending us. He, Jesus and the Holy Spirit do not change, and so they *continue* ask, "Who will go for us?" The question is, will we? Even though people needing hope may not want to listen to us, are we willing to go and speak the good news of Christ? Better still, are we willing to go and SHOW them the love of Christ through our acts of humble service? After all, Jesus did not come and just talk. He came and He did something. "He came to serve, and not be served, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Humans existed for thousands of years before the birth of Jesus Christ. The Population Reference Bureau estimates that the number of people to have ever lived and died on Planet Earth is roughly 105 billion people. Only two percent of them were born prior to the birth of Jesus. That means that Jesus was born at just the right time, and that being before the exponential explosion of the world's population. Jesus came at just the right time. He came *unexpectedly*; at an *unexpected* time and in an *unexpected* way, bringing with Him a most *unexpected* gift—the mercy of God.

It was God's plan to happen this way. After all, it is God's kingdom and not ours.

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