

# God Sends

God calls His people to recognize and declare His sovereign purposes.

At the university where I teach—Columbia International University—my colleagues and I have an ongoing discussion about the school’s mission and how we can better achieve it. Our mission as Christian teachers is to educate from a biblical worldview to impact the nations with the message of Christ. We believe that God calls all of His people into ministry—that is, to serve others in Jesus’ name. We base our view of ministry in part on what the apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3:23-24: “Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.”

Over the years, I have seen the Lord deploy our graduates into many different forms of service. Some become pastors and church leaders, while others serve on the mission field and take the gospel to places and people who have not yet heard about Jesus Christ. Still others train in business or other careers with the goal of leveraging their professions for God’s glory. The common denominator for all of our graduates is that they view their primary calling as the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20).

In Isaiah 6, God called Isaiah to the prophetic ministry. In the midst of a vision of God’s glory, Isaiah felt small and sinful. Yet, God cleansed him and commissioned him for the prophetic service that God’s people desperately needed in that day. As we study Isaiah 6:1-13 in this session, may we place ourselves in the picture and affirm that God calls all of His people to recognize and declare His sovereign purposes.

## UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

### ISAIAH 5:1-6:13

In 5:1-7, Isaiah presented an allegorical song about a vineyard owner and his vineyard. In 5:1-2, the song’s first stanza describes a vineyard owner who took

utmost care to prepare a vineyard for bearing fruit. He tilled the soil, cleared stones, planted choice vines, and constructed a watchtower and winepress. Then, as expected, the vineyard produced a crop of grapes. Unexpectedly, however, the grapes turned out to be bitter and therefore worthless.

In 5:3-7, Isaiah then explained the song's prophetic meaning. The Lord was the vineyard owner and the people of Israel were His vineyard. He had done everything needed to plant His covenant people in the promised land. He expected them to produce good spiritual fruit—justice and righteousness—instead, they produced wickedness, injustice, and despair.

Isaiah then delivered a series of six woe-oracles against the people of Judah in the remainder of chapter 5 (see 5:8,11,18,20-22). Interspersed among the woe-oracles are descriptions of the consequences God's people would face as a result of their rebellion and sinfulness (see 5:9-10,13-15,24-30). In 5:16-17, Isaiah placed a declaration of the Lord's exalted holiness in contrast to the people's unfaithfulness.

Having called God's people to trial and laid out the evidence of their sin, Isaiah then recorded his vision of the sovereign, reigning Lord (6:1-13). Most Bible students consider chapter 6 to describe Isaiah's call to be a prophet. The vision occurred sometime around 740 BC, "the year that King Uzziah died" (6:1). Uzziah's death—after having ruled in Jerusalem more than fifty years—likely contributed to Isaiah's yearning to hear from the Lord.

In his vision, Isaiah saw the Lord seated on His heavenly throne, surrounded by angelic beings that proclaimed His glory (6:1-3). The sights and sounds of God's presence in the temple caused Isaiah to recognize and confess not only his own sinfulness but also that of the people (6:5). Upon Isaiah's confession, one of the angelic beings touched the prophet's mouth with a coal from the altar and declared Isaiah to be cleansed (6:6-7). When the Lord then asked for someone to take His message to the wayward people of Judah, Isaiah volunteered to go (6:8).

God's initial message to Isaiah was largely a negative one (6:9-13). The people would listen to the prophet's message, but most would refuse to grasp its meaning since their minds had become spiritually dull.

## EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

### **GOD'S GLORY** (Isa. 6:1-4)

Isaiah described the scene of God's throne room revealed to him in a vision. The throne was encircled by seraphim that boldly declared God's majesty

and holiness. The sounds shook the temple doorways, while smoke filled the inner chambers.

## VERSE 1

**In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.**

The words **in the year that King Uzziah** [uh ZIGH uh] **died** provide a clue as to the time of Isaiah's vision and thus the starting point of his prophetic ministry. Bible historians generally place Uzziah's reign over the Southern Kingdom of Judah at 792–740 BC. Thus, Isaiah's visionary call to be the Lord's prophet occurred at some point in 740 BC.

Descriptions of Uzziah (also known as Azariah) and his reign in Judah appear in 2 Kings 15:1-7 and 2 Chronicles 26:1-23. Sixteen years old at the time of his father's assassination, Uzziah was elevated to the kingship by popular demand (2 Chron. 26:1). By and large, he did what was right in the Lord's eyes during his long reign (2 King 15:3; 2 Chron. 26:4-15). Toward the end of his reign, however, Uzziah tried to usurp the priestly role. For this act the Lord struck the king with a skin disease, probably leprosy. Uzziah appointed his son, Jotham, to carry out his royal duties (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chron. 26:16-21).

Thus, Isaiah's reference to the year of Uzziah's death reveals that Judah was in a time of political and social uncertainty. During this time of uncertainty in Judah, God showed Isaiah that He was sovereign. Uzziah might have died, but the eternal, sovereign Lord was still reigning on His heavenly throne.

The words **I saw the Lord** comprise the main theme of Isaiah 6:1-4. Other details of Isaiah's vision are revealed, but they all point to the central theme of his vision of God Almighty. Isaiah saw that the Lord was **seated on a high and lofty throne** ("high and exalted, seated on a throne," NIV). Grammatically, the phrase *high and lofty* can refer either to the Lord or His throne. Both renderings have the same emphasis: the Lord's majesty and sovereignty over His creation. The Lord's presence was so overwhelming that merely the **hem** ("train," KJV; ESV; NIV) **of his robe filled the temple** with splendor. The emphasis is that the stately temple could scarcely contain even a small portion of God's sovereign, infinite presence (1 Kings 8:27). Isaiah was reminded that God was vastly greater and more powerful than any earthly king or historical circumstance.

## VERSE 2

**Seraphim were standing above him; they each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.**

The word **seraphim** is the plural form of a Hebrew term that often referred to a type of venomous snake (see Num. 21:6; Isa. 30:6). The root verb means “to burn,” which may have been a description of the intense burning sensation caused by the viper’s poison. In Isaiah 6:2, however, the term describes angelic beings that surrounded the Lord on His heavenly throne. How many of these creatures Isaiah saw is not stated; there were at least two—thus the plural form—and perhaps many more. Isaiah noted their position as **standing above** the Lord on His throne. They were humbly attending and worshipping (see 6:3) Him.

Isaiah then described that the seraphim **each had six wings**. He noted that the seraphim’s wings fulfilled three purposes. With one pair of wings **they covered their faces**. Covering the face could be either an act of deference or an indication the seraphim knew they could not look directly on the Lord’s divine glory without consequence (compare Ex. 33:20).

With a second pair of wings the seraphim **covered their feet**. In some contexts, this phrase served as a euphemism for covering one’s private areas in modesty (see 1 Sam. 24:3). However, the imagery also may simply denote humility or recognition that God is the One who guides the seraphim’s path.

With their third pair of wings the seraphim **flew**. They were ready on a moment’s notice to act on the Lord’s command. They would go wherever He directed and do whatever He wanted.

### VERSE 3

**And one called to another: Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies; his glory fills the whole earth.**

Isaiah witnessed the seraphim engaging in ongoing worship. In particular, he heard one of the seraphim testifying about the Lord’s glorious nature. The threefold exclamation **holy, holy, holy** may have been a reference to the Trinity. More likely in this context, however, the phrase underscored the utter uniqueness, righteousness, and goodness of the Lord’s nature. There is no other like Him (see Isa. 40:21-24).

The expression **LORD of Armies** (“LORD of Hosts,” KJV; ESV; “LORD Almighty,” NIV) conveys the sense of God’s sovereign power. He is the supreme commander of not only the armies of Israel but also the hosts of angels and, indeed, the stars—His countless celestial warriors.

The seraphim affirmed that God’s **glory fills the whole earth**. This Hebrew phrase can be rendered literally as “the fullness of all the earth is His glory.” The word rendered *glory* has as its basic meaning “to be heavy.” God’s *glory* thus refers to the weighty majesty of His presence. The mere “hem of His robe” filled the temple to overflowing (6:1). Now the seraphim

proclaimed that the whole earth could not contain the fullness of His holy presence. Consequently, the Lord was (and is) far greater than any threat or circumstance that His people might face.

#### VERSE 4

**The foundations of the doorways shook at the sound of their voices, and the temple was filled with smoke.**

The phrase **foundations of the doorways** (“posts of the door,” KJV; “foundations of the thresholds,” ESV; “doorposts and thresholds,” NIV) refers to the solid stone thresholds that supported the massive doorposts. That the thresholds **shook** (“moved,” KJV) **at the sound** of the seraphim’s voices emphasizes the thunderous level of their worship. They wanted heaven and earth to hear their praise of the sovereign Lord God.

Finally, Isaiah saw that **the temple was filled with smoke**. Smoke arising from the altar of burnt offerings would have been a common sight at the Jerusalem temple. Based on the model of the tabernacle, there was also an altar of incense that stood in front of the massive curtain separating the holy place from the holy of holies, or most holy place (Ex. 30:1-9). Incense was to be burned daily on this altar; over time, the incense smoke came to represent the fervent prayers of God’s people (see Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:3-4).

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### EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article entitled “Glory” on pages 647–648 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What images come to your mind when you think of God’s glory? Where do you see God’s glory on display in the world around you?

### GOD’S FORGIVENESS (Isa. 6:5-7)

#### VERSE 5

**Then I said: Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies.**

People in the Scriptures who encountered God invariably felt a sense of great awe—if not fear—as well as a sense of overwhelming personal inadequacy. The Hebrew term rendered **woe** is an interjection, a guttural cry of grief and despair. Hebrew prophets sometimes introduced an oracle of judgment with

this term (Isa. 3:11; Jer. 48:46; Ezek. 24:6; Hos. 7:13). Isaiah used it in 6:5 to express grief and a sense of helplessness concerning his sinful condition. He realized that he was **ruined** (“undone,” KJV; “lost,” ESV).

The text presents three reasons Isaiah felt this way. First, he confessed that he was **a man of unclean lips**. Psalm 24:4 declares that a person who hopes to stand in God’s presence and receive His blessing must have “clean hands and a pure heart, who has not appealed to what is false, and who has not sworn deceitfully.” Isaiah did not specify the ways in which he had failed to speak the truth—whether by omission, commission, or both—yet, he knew that the word *unclean* described what was in his heart.

Second, Isaiah confessed that he lived **among a people of unclean lips** and too often “went along to get along” rather than hold himself and the people around him accountable for covenant faithfulness. Third, Isaiah felt utterly lost and helpless because he had **seen the King, the LORD of Armies**. The ultimate example of purity and holiness and the standard by which Isaiah and all people will be judged had appeared before the prophet in a vision.

God’s holiness exposed Isaiah’s sin, and it also exposes our sin. The apostle Paul wrote that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Consequently, we all fall short of God’s glory and His holy standard. Without His grace and forgiveness provided in Jesus Christ, we too would be utterly lost, helpless, and ruined.

## VERSE 6

**Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs.**

When Isaiah confessed his unworthiness, God was ready to provide the solution. He sent **one of the seraphim** (literally, “burning ones”) to respond to Isaiah’s confession. The seraph was holding **in his hand ... a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar**. The huge altar standing outside the holy place was used for burnt offerings and sacrifices, including the sin and guilt offerings (2 Chron. 4:1; Lev. 6:24-25; 7:1-2). Inside the holy place stood the altar of incense (see Ex. 30:1-6; 2 Chron. 4:19). Since the focus of Isaiah’s vision appears to be inside the temple proper, probably the coal was taken off of the incense altar. In any case, the *glowing coal* represents the cleansing agent the Lord would use to purify Isaiah from his sins.

## VERSE 7

**He touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your iniquity is removed and your sin is atoned for.**

Isaiah had confessed his sinfulness in terms of having “unclean lips” (6:5). Accordingly, the seraph **touched** the glowing coal to Isaiah’s **mouth** and **lips**.

The Lord designated that the glowing coal would serve as a tangible sign of His forgiveness and cleansing. Thus, when the seraph completed the action of applying the coal to Isaiah's mouth, he declared that Isaiah's **iniquity** ("guilt," NIV) had been **removed**. The Hebrew term rendered *iniquity* can also be translated "guilt." It emphasizes the crooked or perverse spirit associated with sin. The word rendered *removed* ("taken away," KJV; ESV; NIV) refers to the turning away or canceling of the sinner's guilt.

Next, the seraph affirmed that Isaiah's **sin** had been **atoned for**. The Hebrew word rendered *sin* emphasizes a person's falling short of God's standard of holiness. The word translated *atoned for* ("purged," KJV) has as its basic meaning "to cover over." In the context of God's covenant with the people of Israel, this term described the once-a-year blood sacrifices offered by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16). The Day of Atonement sacrifices foreshadowed the ultimate atonement God provided for sinners through the death of Christ on the cross (see Heb. 9:14).

We all, like Isaiah, stand in need of God's forgiveness. Jesus' perfect sacrifice secured the salvation of all who place their faith in Him. While the atonement rituals in the law and the fiery coal in Isaiah's vision foreshadowed God's provision of atonement, it was Jesus Christ the Son of God who ultimately enacted that atonement through His death on the cross. Jesus is the ultimate Source of our forgiveness.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Atonement" on pages 144–147 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why did God need to reconcile sinners to Himself through the atonement Jesus brought? What does the doctrine of atonement reveal about God? About us?

## GOD'S CALL (Isa. 6:8-10)

### VERSE 8

**Then I heard the voice of the Lord asking: Who should I send?  
Who will go for us? I said: Here I am. Send me.**

Up to this point in his vision, Isaiah had seen the Lord's majestic presence and had heard the seraphim's thundering worship, but he had not heard the Lord speak. Now, however, Isaiah **heard the voice of the Lord**.

God took the initiative and allowed Isaiah into what may have been a heavenly council meeting. The Lord had an important mission that He

wanted carried out. He posed two questions that were designed to enlist the right servant for the mission. The first question (**Who should I send?**) looks at the enlistment from God's point of view. The Lord is the ultimate decider concerning those whom He calls to serve Him. Nevertheless, the second question (**Who will go for us?**) considers the enlistment from the servant's point of view. In other words, would the servant whom God called to mission respond to His call with obedience and faith?

Isaiah understood the Lord's questions as being directed personally to him. To his credit, Isaiah readily responded in the affirmative: **Here I am. Send me.** He did not ask the Lord to first spell out the mission and guarantee his safety. Isaiah simply responded in faith. He was ready to go wherever the Lord wanted and do whatever the Lord commanded.

#### VERSE 9

**And he replied: Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive.**

Having heard Isaiah's commitment, the Lord then directed Isaiah to **go** and speak a divine message to God's **people**. Isaiah's mission was thus to serve as the Lord's prophet, delivering a warning of impending judgment to His sinful people. Interestingly, Isaiah's first prophetic message focused on the response it would generate. The Lord was preparing His prophet to persevere in the mission even when the people refused to repent.

There were both auditory and visual aspects to Hebrew prophecy. Isaiah's first prophetic message employed both aspects. He was to tell the people to **keep listening, but do not understand**. That is, Isaiah's prophetic messages would only increase the people's stubborn unwillingness to hear and heed God's warning of judgment. Similarly, the disobedient people would **keep looking** at events and situations that occurred, but the people would not be able to **perceive** the message God was sending through the events.

#### VERSE 10

**Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed.**

Verse 10 amplifies the numbing impact of Isaiah's prophetic message. God instructed the prophet to **make the minds** ("heart," KJV; ESV; NIV) **of these people dull** ("fat," KJV; calloused," NIV), to **deafen** ("make ... heavy," KJV) **their ears**, and to **blind their eyes**. These impacts seem to be the very opposite of what a prophet might expect to result from his preaching.

Why would God give such directives to Isaiah? He began to answer the question, but not as the prophet might have expected. God told Isaiah to prophesy with these impacts in mind because **otherwise** the people **might see with their eyes** the work God was trying to do among them. They might **hear with their ears** the message of judgment the prophet was bringing. They might truly **understand** the gravity of their spiritual situation and therefore repent (**turn back**) and **be healed**.

How are we to understand the God of grace and forgiveness speaking in these terms? God knew that the only way for the people of Israel and Judah to find true healing was for them to experience His disciplinary judgment. Insincere repentance—being sorry for getting caught—could never bring about the transformed hearts that were needed. Only through the discipline of defeat and exile could God’s people be truly healed and restored.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Call, Calling” on pages 253–254 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are the different aspects of God’s call on a person’s life? What responsibility does the call of God place on our lives?

## GOD’S PERSISTENCE (Isa. 6:11-13)

### VERSE 11

**Then I said, “Until when, Lord?” And he replied: Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate,**

Isaiah clearly understood the implications of the Lord’s message that he was to deliver. His preaching would serve to make the people’s road to judgment all the more certain. Yet, the prophet’s lingering concern was expressed in the question **“Until when, Lord?”** How long would God continue such judgment against His people? Over a century later, the prophet Jeremiah continued to warn God’s people that they would face seventy years of exile (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10).

God told Isaiah that His judgment would last **until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants**. This is a warning that the nation would eventually suffer utter defeat and loss of population. Such devastation to the cities meant that **houses** would stand silent and empty (**without people**). Furthermore, **the land** itself would lie **ruined and desolate**. A ruined and

desolate territory provided a clear image of God’s judgment, in contrast to a future day of restoration when the land would be teeming with joyful citizens (see Isa. 54:1-3).

## VERSE 12

**and the LORD drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land.**

The words **the LORD drives the people far away** leave no doubt as to the reason for the devastation God described in verse 11. These things did not happen by chance; rather, they reflected God’s righteous judgment against a sinful people. Ultimately, God would send His people into captivity in Babylon. **Great emptiness** (“great forsaking,” KJV) would result **in the land**.

## VERSE 13

**Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again. Like the terebinth or the oak that leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump.**

This verse affirms that God’s disciplinary judgment had as its ultimate purpose the refining of His people. The phrase **a tenth will remain** indicates that while the vast majority of people would be gone as a result of God’s judgment, a small group would still be **in the land**. Nevertheless, even this small portion of the population would face further purifying. The survivors would be **burned again**—that is, they would face further judgment for the purpose of even greater spiritual refinement.

The Lord compared His process of disciplinary judgment to the felling of a tree such as a **terebinth** or an **oak**. The main part of the tree would be used as firewood, but the remaining **stump** would one day sprout new life. Thus, the stump would represent **the holy seed**. God’s judgment was certain, and it would be severe, but the Lord did not leave Isaiah (or His people) without hope. One day a refined remnant would return to the Lord and then would be restored to the promised land.

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## EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Remnant” on pages 1343–1344 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the concept of a faithful remnant in Isaiah 6:13 encourage you as you serve God? How can God advance His kingdom even when our circumstances seem bleak?