

How Seeing God Changes Everything (Isaiah 6)
Isaiah: Trusting the God Who Judges, Saves, and Renews
Zionsville Fellowship | October 11, 2026 | Drew Hunter

This is one of those stories in Scripture that towers over the rest.

This is the kind of story that can radically alter our view of reality. It changes our view of God—which then changes our view of ourselves, our view of God’s grace, and our view of the future. And it starts with seeing God.

It's been 25 years since the September 11th terrorist attacks.

Immediately after that morning, people crowded into churches. The word “evil” came back into our vocabulary. It was a serious time.

But it didn’t last long. And one thing that moment exposed was our superficial view of reality. Here’s what the theologian David Wells observed: *“One of the things that this moment exposed was the church. This moment of tragedy and evil shone its own light on the Church and what we came to see was not a happy sight. For what has become conspicuous by its scarcity, and not least in the evangelical corner of it, is a spiritual *gravitas*, one which could match the depth of horrendous evil and address issues of such seriousness. Evangelicalism, now much absorbed by the arts and tricks of marketing, is simply not very serious anymore.”ⁱ*

When we have a small, light, unserious view of God, this leads to an unserious view of sin. Which leads to a light view of God’s grace in Jesus.

Isaiah 6 awakens us to see the glory of God, the sinfulness of sin, and the graciousness of grace.

Isaiah’s experience was unique—and it served a unique purpose in his time. But it is also intended to be an example of how spiritual renewal comes.

Isaiah’s vision of God changes how he viewed himself, his ministry, and the future. It’s here to lead us into this same kind of experience—to see God’s glory, receive his cleansing, and live with a sobering, but hopeful ministry.

So, we’ll follow this story in four parts—we’ll see an exalted view of God, a surprising view of grace, a sobering view of ministry, and a hopeful view of the future.

1. An Exalted View of God (v. 1–4)

It begins with an exalted view of God—notice what he saw, what he heard, and what he felt.

First, he saw God exalted as the true king.

It says, “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Israel’s temple was viewed as the palace of God, where he was enthroned. And the temple on earth was an earthly replica symbolizing God’s presence in heaven.

He sees the train of God’s robe filling the temple. Not a bathrobe, but God’s royal robe. And it’s huge—the train of it is filling the whole temple as God is exalted above it. This was a way of communicating God’s glory and greatness. The closest parallel to this in modern history is a bride’s wedding dress. When Princess Diana was married in 1981, the train of her dress was 25 feet long—it communicated regal glory.

Then Isaiah sees angelic beings called seraphim. It’s hard to know exactly what they were like. The Hebrew word is used elsewhere to describe fiery serpents. In Israel’s history, those fiery serpents were sent as agents of God’s judgment—so these flying seraphim were probably an ominous sign.ⁱⁱ

That’s what he saw. What did he hear?

Verse 3—one seraph called to another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Hebrew writing used repetition to make an emphasis. So, instead of saying, “the sky was incredibly dark,” they said, “the sky was dark dark.” Only here do we get a word repeated three times. The point is that God is infinitely holy.

What is holiness? Holiness is not just one characteristic of many; or one attribute of many—but the perfection of all God’s attributes. It is his intrinsic worth and the moral perfection of his character.ⁱⁱⁱ One way to think of it is that God’s holiness is his intrinsic worth; and his glory is the radiant outshining, or demonstration of that worth.

This is what Isaiah is coming to terms with: the weight of God’s significance.

Now we see what Isaiah felt.

He felt an earthquake from the sound of the seraphim proclaiming God’s holiness. And he saw the temple fill with smoke.

It reminds me of the first time I saw an Indy car up-close. I was shocked. I didn’t just see it flash by; I heard it and felt it. Or if you’ve ever been near when a jet breaks the sound barrier—you hear the sonic boom and feel the pressure waves.

This is the vision of God that Isaiah needed, and so do we.

It's a vision of God exalted and enthroned as the true king of the universe.

This didn't just shake the foundations underneath Isaiah; it shook him to the core of his being. He would never be the same after this.

I remember hearing Tim Keller teach this text twenty years ago. I'll never forget how he put it. He said Isaiah experienced a *God-quake*. God became less of a concept, and more of a reality to him. And this is why it changed his life.

And that's what you and I need. This God is not a concept; he is a reality. He is not weightless, but infinitely significant.

This is not a God you can manipulate. This is not a God who is merely your guidance counselor. This is not a big man upstairs.

How do we respond to a God like this?

2. A Surprising View of Grace (v. 5–7)

That's what we see next—and it shows us a surprising view of grace.

Isaiah says, verse 5, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

To say, “woe is me,” doesn't come across to us in the way he meant it. This is not self-pity. This means he stands condemned.

So, he adds, “I am lost,” Which means something more like, “a dead man standing.”

Why? Because he saw the true king enthroned in his glory. He has now seen God in his holiness; so he sees himself as unclean and unholy.

Notice how he identifies himself thoroughly with his sin.

He doesn't say, “I'm a decent guy, certainly not worse than most of the people in my country. But yeah, sometimes I say things I shouldn't. Sometimes I slip up.” We say things like that because we're comparing ourselves to others.

But he compares himself to God now. So he says, “I am a man of unclean, unholy, impure speech.” When you see God as he really is, you see the gap between his holiness and yours. You see not just your sin, but the sinfulness of your sin.

You no longer say, “I slip up sometimes. I’m not perfect.” You say, “I’m a man of impatience. I’m a man of lust. I’m a woman of anger. I’m a woman of greed.”

And at this moment of Isaiah’s confession—notice the surprise of what happens next.

One of the seraphim started to fly toward him. Remember—these are probably terrifying angelic agents of judgment. And now one is coming at him, holding a burning coal.

But the coal is from the altar. Why? Notice what happens next. He touches Isaiah’s mouth with it. The very place where Isaiah said was the source of his sin—his lips. And rather than burning him; it cleanses him. He’s immediately and totally and graciously forgiven. The seraph says his guilt is removed, and his sin is atoned for.

When you see the glory of God, you see the sinfulness of sin. You know you should be dead—struck down, unworthy to live, experiencing his judgment.

And this magnifies the graciousness of grace. It’s totally undeserved. Grace will not be a marvel to you until you know the holiness of God and the sinfulness of your sin. Until you know you’re undone and done for. Only then will we grasp the graciousness of grace.

But how was his sin forgiven through that piece of coal? What is that about?

Remember where the coal is from. It was from the altar. Probably the altar in the temple where the sacrifices were made. The animals were sacrificed as a substitution for the sinner—the sinner deserves death, but the animal dies instead.

Now, you may know that all these animal sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus’s sacrifice. Only he can remove our sin through his substitutionary death.

And Isaiah actually makes this connection for us later. He introduces us to the servant in chapter 53, who sacrifices his life for us.

The servant is the one who will live a perfect life and then die as a sacrifice for the people.

He will be a sheep led to the slaughter.

He will bear our sins upon himself.

He will take our judgment.

He will be the true and final sacrifice on the altar to remove our guilt.

This is why Isaiah’s story can become our story.

Isaiah’s experience became a pathway for Israel. He identified with them in their uncleanness—he said he is a man of unclean lips, who dwells among a people of unclean lips. They all have the same problem. But Isaiah came to terms with God’s glory and the weight of his sin; and God extended grace. This is an example of what God can do.

Isaiah's experience is a pathway for us to follow. We are to see God's holiness and glory. And this should lead us to see the sinfulness of our sin. And then we look to Christ as the sacrifice on that altar, providing our forgiveness.

A big view of God leads to a big view of sin and grace.

Here's the pattern so far: God, guilt, and grace. Seeing God as he is leads to confessing our guilt, which leads to receiving God's grace.

But that's not where Isaiah's story ends, and neither does ours. God always saves us and sends us out on mission.

3. A Sobering View of Ministry (v. 8–13a)

This leads to third, a sobering view of ministry, in verses 8–13.

I think Isaiah was stunned that he was cleansed rather than killed.

Then he hears God speak from way up high, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah doesn't know what the job entails. He doesn't know where he would need to go.

But he finds himself saying: "Here I am. Down here. I'll go. I'll do it."

That's what happens...

...when God and his grace is no longer an abstract idea to you.

...when you know who God really is, and you know how much grace he's given.

...when you know that God himself came in Christ to lay his life down for you.

You don't need the job description when you are dealing with this kind of God.

You do whatever he says.

He gave himself for you; you will gladly give yourself for him.

Could you respond to God this way? Do you trust him like this? That's what it is—total trust. He has your total confidence.

Are you holding back something from him?

Is there something he's commanded in his word that you aren't on board with yet?

Is there some sin you are unwilling to cut out of your life?

Do you think certain views of the Bible are outdated and you can't accept?

...Then you don't yet know God like Isaiah did.

...You don't yet see his holiness, the sinfulness of your sin, and the graciousness of his grace.

Now after signing up, Isaiah hears what his task is.

And it's not what he was expecting. It's not what we are expecting.

In fact, when I've studied this text with people over the years—I've seen that this is one of the hardest texts for people to grasp. And it's not because it's complicated. It's because we just don't expect God to say this—it doesn't fit our categories. So we try to make it say something that it doesn't say in order to make it fit what we think God *should* say.

What does he say? Read verses 9–10 carefully. Listen to what's here. 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.”

Now, what is he saying? Not what we expect.

We expect him to say to Isaiah, “Go to this people and tell them keep on hearing, and finally understand. See, and perceive. Make the heart of this people soft, their ears and eyes open—so that they will see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts, and so that they will turn and be healed.”

God said the opposite. He sent him to preach, with the result that they would *not* understand. Why? *Lest* they repent and be healed. So that they will *not* repent and be healed. Isaiah is sent on a mission to cause Israel to be hardened toward God, so that they won't repent and be saved.

Isaiah gets the point.

Which is why he says in verse 11, “How long, O Lord?” How long will this last? And God answers—until the whole land is destroyed and desolate and Israel is carried away in exile.

God illustrates this with a tree. He says Israel is a tree, and they're going to be cut down 90%, until just a 10th remains. And then it's going to be burned again. Down to just a stump.

Why? What is going on?

The key to understand this is seeing that this comes in chapter 6, not chapter 1. Do you remember what we've seen in chapters 1–5? Israel has been rejecting God for centuries, from the very beginning. Their nation is just as morally corrupt as the other godless nations. They are filled with greed and social injustice. And they have refused to change. They have refused to repent.

And yet God did everything for them. He gave them every advantage. To the point where he said in chapter 5, verse 4, “what more could I have done for them?”

And so now Israel reached a point of no return. God said all along that if they refused to repent, they would be judged. Nations would invade them, destroy them, and carry them away to exile. And now it’s time.

This is the turning point in Israel’s history. Remember how this chapter started: This is the year King Uzziah died. It’s a turning point. They had a generation of prosperity and protection, and they squandered it. They hated the Lord and oppressed one another. Now the king died, and it’s time. So God appears to Isaiah to commission him.

And Isaiah’s particular role is to preach with the result that they’ll be further hardened. They are already hardened. They are already unrepentant. But Isaiah’s preaching will escalate things—it will confirm them in their sin, and make them even more ready for judgment.

I wonder what you think about this.

Some people would like this not to be in the Bible.

But do you know what’s interesting? The New Testament is constantly quoting the Old Testament. And Isaiah is one of the two most quoted books in the New Testament. It’s constant. And do you know what is the most quoted part of Isaiah in the New Testament? It’s these ones—verses 9 and 10.

Why? Because this is what made sense of Jesus and the church’s ministry. This is what God did through Isaiah, and it’s what he continued to do through Jesus and the apostles. And it’s what he continues to do today.

Think about it. Jesus quotes these verses to explain why he talked in parables. A lot of people think he talked in parables to make his teaching easier to understand. But that wasn’t the reason for the parables. Do you know why he said he spoke in parables? In Mark 4, he told his disciples why. And he did so by simply quoting verses 9–10 here. He spoke in parables to make some people *not* understand.

Why? Because in Jesus’s ministry when he said this, it was at the exact same kind of moment Isaiah was in here. Jesus showed up, did miracles, forgave sins, and preached grace. And many people rejected him. To the point where they already started to plot to kill him. And at that moment, Jesus started to speak in parables. It was to divide people. Those who were unrepentant would be further hardened by his teaching. And those whom he decided to open their eyes; they would see. Jesus was continuing the ministry of Isaiah.

And then Paul quotes these verses to explain his own ministry as well.

This helps us get realistic expectations for ministry.

Just because no one listens to you doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. You *might be*; but maybe not. God doesn't just use the gospel to bring awakening and revival; he can bring it to harden people further for judgment. That's sobering. We never walk away from reading the Bible or hearing a sermon the same way we came. We are either softer or harder.

This helps us refrain from being tempted to manipulate the message. Some Christians try to adapt the message of the gospel to get a better response from the culture. They want to tell people what they want to hear. So they adjust it. But our job is not to manipulate the message to get a positive response. Our job, like Isaiah's, is to be faithful. God is in charge of the results.

But while this is a sobering view of ministry, it is not hopeless. Not at all.

4. A Hopeful View of History (v. 13b)

This leads to the last point—a hopeful view of history.

This is the final line of the chapter. Remember Isaiah's image of Israel as a tree chopped down to a stump. That's severe. But there *is* a stump. And, the final line: "The holy seed is its stump."

After Israel is judged, there will be a remaining little remnant of people left. The tree of Israel fell; but a remnant remains as a stump. And God calls this remnant "the holy seed." These are the people who follow Isaiah's pathway of cleansing. They see God's holiness, they see their sinfulness, and they receive God's forgiving grace. They have been cleansed.

And from this little remnant of cleansed Israelites—the messiah will come. Here's what I mean. Isaiah says this little remaining remnant will be a stump. But then in Isaiah 11:1, we read this promise: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him..." Out of that stump, a shoot will rise. And that shoot is the Messiah. Jesus.

Is this not what happened?

Isaiah's ministry was 700 years before Jesus. He preached to Israel, and they *did* reject him. They did get conquered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. They did get taken into exile. And then God caused some to return to the land. And right before Jesus was born—you had a largely unfaithful nation, but still a small believing remnant—including Joseph and Mary. And Jesus came from that little remnant.^{iv}

Here's the point:

History is hopeful. The future is hopeful. God will keep cleansing people by grace.

No matter how dark things get in our community, in our nation, around the planet—God will keep preserving a remnant.

So we, like Isaiah, can keep sharing Jesus—with a sober view of ministry, but a hopeful view of the future.

Three Questions

Three final questions.

First, do you see Jesus here?

Every part of this text—every part of it shows us something of Jesus's glory. You don't see Jesus's name mentioned here at all. But when we step back and realize how this fits in the whole story of the Bible, we see that he is everywhere here. And this helps us see his glory and greatness.

Here's what I mean. Think of each of the four steps we took through this text.

- First, an exalted view of God—high and lifted up, enthroned with glory. Do you know who this is. In the gospel of John, chapter 12, John quotes from this text and said Isaiah saw *Jesus's* glory. Isaiah was getting a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ here.
- Second, a surprising view of grace—as the coal from the altar cleansed Isaiah's sin. Where was that coal from? The altar in the temple, the place of sacrifice. Jesus came to be the ultimate sacrifice, so that we could be cleansed. When you come to Christ, this is what happens to you—you are, in a sense, touched with the blood from the cross, and you are cleansed.
- Third, a sobering view of ministry. Isaiah's prophetic ministry was a pattern that Jesus ultimately fulfilled. Jesus came and continued this ministry of preaching, which led to a division—some were hardened, some were softened.
- And fourth, a hopeful view of history. God said Israel would be chopped down to a stump, and then we saw that a shoot would rise from that stump. The Messiah. Jesus.

Jesus is the Lord enthroned in glory, the sacrifice on the alter, the true prophetic preacher, and the messiah who came from the stump.

This is Jesus's glory. And when we see Jesus—not just as an abstract idea here—but as the one who loves us and cleanses us and commissions us—this changes our lives.

Second, do you see yourself here?

Isaiah is meant to be a pattern for us. He is a pathway for us to follow. He lived in the midst of a darkened and upside-down culture like ours. And he confessed his sin and God cleansed him.

This is what God invites you and me to do: To follow this pattern that he went through.

We can summarize it as God, guilt, grace, and gratitude.

We see God's holiness, which leads to seeing and confessing our guilt.

This leads to receiving his grace through Jesus.

And then we respond with gratitude.

This gratitude means sharing this good news with others—even if they reject it, which many will.

If you have not received this grace, it's here for you. But you have to come to it like Isaiah did—you have to know you need it. But that's all you need—your qualification is to know you're disqualified. Isaiah didn't get the grace because of his holiness; but because he confessed his unworthiness.

And Christian, you never outgrow your need for the gospel. Isaiah was already a prophet when he came to this moment. But even then, as a prophet of God—the sight of God's glory humbled him into confession. None of us outgrows our need for this grace. The Christian life is a continual re-entering into this experience.

Third, do you see your sobering, but hopeful mission here?

If you have received this kind of radical grace, the only reasonable response is Isaiah's. Send me. Whatever you want. I trust you. I'll go.

And we don't have to guess at what God might send us to do. He's already revealed it in Scripture. We continue the mission of Isaiah and Jesus here—sharing the gospel with our neighbors and the nations. Knowing that we may be rejected, because Jesus may be rejected. But God loves to save a remnant. And that's worth it.

ⁱ David Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 4.

ⁱⁱ This word is used in only a few places in the OT. Outside of Isa 6, it is only used to refer to the "fiery serpents" in the wilderness, and later in Isaiah. It refers to the "fiery serpents" that bit Israel (Num 21:6), and the "fiery serpent" Moses made and set on a pole (21:8). The seraphim likely bring to mind judgment. That's what the seraphim of Numbers 21 were doing—they were enacting God's judgment against sinful Israel. These are dangerous agents of judgment (Abernathy, 17).

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Chester wrote, “It’s not one attribute among many; it’s the sum total of who he is. He is set apart, distinct, above. It’s the perfection and intensity of all his attributes (Tim Chester, *Isaiah For You*, 20). Peter Gentry questions the etymological approach that says it means set apart or separate. He also challenges the idea that it is about transcendence or moral purity. Instead, he argues it means “consecrated” or “devoted.” In the context of Isaiah 6, he looks back to Isaiah 5:15–16 which refers to God as holy in righteousness, which is in contrast to Israel’s social injustice. God is devoted to his justice and righteousness, which he explains in the covenant, which he expects to be lived out as the people are devoted to him and devoted to his justice among one another. Note: In light of this, we could also say it is to be devoted to God and his glory.

^{iv} And in Romans 9–11, Paul says this is always how God works. He will always keep a remnant of Jewish people coming to Christ for salvation. And now he also spread this gospel to the nations—and some will reject it and be hardened further; and some will be saved.